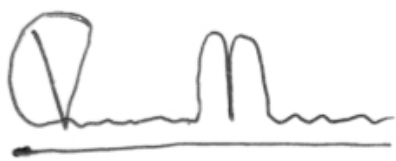
THE CRIMSON GODDESS

Veer Mathur



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नमो देव्यै महादेव्यै शिवायै सततं नमः ।
नमः प्रकृत्यै भद्रायै नियताः प्रणताः स्म ताम् ॥१॥

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Chapter 1: Leela

As Kolkata prepares to bid farewell to Goddess Durga on the final day of Durga Puja, the city pulses with energy. The rhythmic beats of dhak drums echo through the streets as women, draped in traditional sarees, gather for Sindoor Khela—a parting ritual of joy and devotion. Laughter and chants fill the air as they smear sindoor on each other, their hands and faces painted in shades of deep crimson. The streets, bathed in the glow of the setting sun, seem to bleed red—a final, heartfelt tribute before the Goddess departs.

Amidst all the chaos at Kalighat, a woman steps out of her house, her face etched with tension and unease. Fear trembles in the eyes, as if she has uncovered something deeply unsettling. She turns without any question and walks faster, her running steps against all the busy roads leading to the outskirts of this city. She walks through the door, and as it creaks open. Behind her, the door creaks open, and her son watches in silent confusion, his gaze fixed on her retreating figure as she disappears into the crowd, swallowed by the red vermillion surrounding the streets.

After an exhausting two-hour walk, the lady finally reached the dense forest on the outskirts of the city. Her steps slowed as her eyes darted around, searching for something—or perhaps someone. With a deep breath, she reached into her bag and pulled out a folded piece of paper. As she did, her ID card slipped from her grasp, landing on the damp forest floor. The worn plastic bore her name and designation:

“Bengal Times – Junior Assistant Leela Basu”

She quickly picked it up, tucking it back into her bag before unfolding the paper. It was an old, hand-drawn sketch of a temple—its structure faded, yet unmistakable. Her heart pounded as she

traced the outlines of the temple with her fingers. It was real. And if the map was accurate, it was close.

Pressing forward through the thick undergrowth, she finally stumbled upon the very temple depicted on the paper. A strange hush enveloped the air around it. The rustling of leaves, the distant hum of insects, even the whisper of the wind—all seemed to die at the temple's threshold, as if sound itself refused to trespass.

The structure was ancient, its once-grand pillars now wrapped in vines, its stone walls weathered by time. Dust clung to the air like a lingering memory. But what struck her the most was the absence of a *dhwaja*—the sacred flag that adorns every Hindu temple. Its absence felt like an omen, a silent warning left behind by those who once worshipped here. Intricate carvings lined the temple's walls, depicting scenes from Hindu legends. Figures of gods and demons intertwined in tales of cosmic battles, their expressions frozen in time. Yet, as she moved deeper inside, a chill ran down her spine. The *Garba Griha*—the temple's sanctum—was empty. No idol stood at its center. No deity watched over the sacred space. Only a hollow silence, deep and unsettling.

Leela's breath quickened. Something was wrong. She took another cautious step forward, her foot brushing against the stone floor. And then, she felt it—a faint groove, barely visible, running along the ground. Kneeling down, she traced the outline with her hand, her pulse quickening.

A trapdoor.

Swallowing hard, she pressed her fingers against the edge and pushed. The stone groaned as it shifted, revealing a gaping darkness beneath. A faint, almost metallic scent drifted up from below—thick, heavy, and unsettling. She peered down into the abyss, her mind racing with questions.

Controlling her rising fear, she pressed a steady hand against her chest and drew deep, measured breaths. With each step, she descended into the pit—a yawning void that seemed to swallow every sound except the resounding thump of her own footsteps echoing in the darkness. The walls of the descent were slick with moisture, and every sound was magnified in the oppressive silence. A shifting shadow trailed her silently behind. Suddenly, the trapdoor above slammed shut, sealing off any escape and plunging her further into a suffocating isolation. The silence that followed was profound and chilling, as if the very air was holding its breath. There was nothing but silence—a quiet so overwhelming and pervasive that it resonated with the intensity of a loud, unyielding echo. Nothing was heard after that.

Her son sat on the cool verandah of their modest home, his eyes fixed on the procession of Durga idols being immersed into the Hooghly River at Kalighat. He awaited his mother's return with a hopeful heart—she had promised to prepare his favorite dinner, *Bandhakopir Ghonto* with crisp, golden puris, once her work was done. All night long, he watched, transfixed, as one by one the idols were lowered into the dark, flowing river, their vibrant forms swallowed by the tide. Yet, as the hours slipped by, his hope waned. The last glimpse he had of her was when she

disappeared into a sky streaked with haunting crimson vermilion—an eerie, final image that bled into his memory, as if the heavens themselves had sealed her fate in an unsettling farewell.

As the night deepened into an endless silence, the boy sat alone, the echoes of his mother's promises mingling with the fading light. In that quiet, eerie moment, the city and its ancient rituals bore witness to a mystery that would linger like an unhealed scar.

Chapter 2: Arrival

Twenty-five years had passed, yet the city remained unchanged in its devotion. Once again, Kolkata prepared to welcome her beloved daughter, Maa Durga. On the sacred morning of *Mahalaya*, as the first light of dawn broke over the Hooghly, the city shimmered like a newlywed bride—adorned in dazzling lights, the scent of incense swirling in the air, and the rhythmic beats of dhak echoing through its ancient streets.

There was a certain serenity hidden within the chaos. Pandals, grand and ornate, rose like mythical palaces at every corner, each competing in artistry and scale, waiting to house the goddess. In Kumartuli, the heart of idol craftsmanship, artisans carefully put their final touches on the clay deities, their hands steady as they prepared for the evening's sacred ritual—*Chokkhu Daan*, the moment the goddess's eyes were painted, breathing life

into her divine form.

Markets in North Kolkata buzzed with energy—women in crisp cotton saris haggled over decorations, brass puja thalis gleamed under the golden sun, and the air carried the tantalizing aroma of freshly fried khasta kachoris. In every home, preparations were underway to welcome the goddess, but amidst the revelry, one man stood apart.

Anirban Basu, now a grown man of thirty, weaved through the crowded streets of Kalighat, the same place where, decades ago, he had last seen his mother disappear into a sky stained with vermilion. The memory of that night had never left him. It lingered in the corners of his mind like a shadow—unspoken, unresolved. He had spent years trying to understand, searching for answers in old newspaper archives, in whispers of forgotten folklore, in the depths of his own nightmares. Yet, the city moved forward, as it always had, celebrating, forgetting. But this year felt different.

As Anirban glanced at the towering idols of Durga on the streets, their fierce, unblinking eyes staring back at him, a shiver ran down his spine. He didn't know why, but something about this festival—this year—felt eerily familiar, as if the past was about to resurface, waiting to be unearthed.

Little did he know, the goddess had already arrived. And so had the unanswered whispers of his mother's fate.

Anirban Basu had inherited his mother's relentless curiosity, a trait that had propelled him to success in his career. As an investigative journalist for the Times Group, he had already made a name for himself, uncovering hidden truths and exposing stories others dared not touch. His sharp instincts and unwavering determination had set him apart, earning him a swift promotion to one of the most demanding roles in the newsroom. Unlike desk reporters, Anirban thrived in the field, delving deep into the heart of unfolding mysteries, chasing leads through the labyrinthine streets of the city, and bringing the raw, unfiltered truth back to his editor's desk.

That morning, Anirban was preparing to leave for Choudhury Bari, a grand ancestral mansion that had stood in the heart of North Kolkata for generations. The Choudhurys were an old and

influential Bengali family, known not just for their wealth but for their deep-rooted connection to tradition. Their Durga Puja celebrations were among the most revered in the city, drawing politicians, intellectuals, and artists alike. Anirban was invited every year to cover the news of their grand celebrations.

At the head of the family was **Indranil Choudhury**, a man in his late fifties, whose composed demeanor and aristocratic air made him a respected figure in the city's elite circles. A scholar in ancient Hindu traditions and an unwavering preserver of the family's customs, he carried a quiet intensity that made people listen when he spoke. His wife, **Supriya Choudhury**, was known for her elegance and devotion to the puja. She managed the household with grace, ensuring that every ritual, every offering, and every custom was followed to perfection.

Their son, **Siddharth Choudhury**, had inherited his father's disciplined nature but chose to immerse himself in the world of business. His success had brought even more prestige to the family, though he was rarely seen during the celebrations, often engrossed in work. Anirban had never met him in person but had heard much about his sharp mind and reserved personality.

Among those closely tied to the Choudhury family was **Riya**, a woman who had been Supriya's close friend for years. She was more than a guest; she was family in every sense except by blood. Her presence at Choudhury Bari was as natural as the festival itself. Intelligent, kind, and deeply perceptive, she was well-versed in the traditions of the puja and assisted Supriya in managing the grand celebrations.

Anirban had known Riya for years. Their interactions had always been easy, filled with friendly banter and shared moments. But lately, something had shifted within him—a growing fondness, an unspoken pull toward her that he hadn't yet found the courage to address.

The taxi wove through the narrow streets of North Kolkata, past rows of colonial-era buildings adorned with age-old festoons and fresh garlands. The air was thick with the scent of incense, flowers, and the unmistakable fragrance of *dhuno* smoke wafting from every street corner. Anirban rolled down the window, letting the crisp morning air brush against his face as he approached Choudhury Bari.

The mansion loomed ahead, its towering gates wide open, inviting the city's devotees into its grandeur. The Choudhurys' Durga Puja was an event Kolkata held in reverence. The massive thakur dalan, a courtyard built for rituals, was already alive with the sounds of

conch shells and rhythmic beats of the dhak. The intricate pandal inside the courtyard shimmered under the morning light, housing an unfinished yet breathtaking Durga idol—her form majestic, her eyes yet to be painted.

Anirban stepped out of the taxi, adjusting his bag over his shoulder. He didn't have to search long for a familiar face. Near the entrance, surrounded by a small group of workers, stood **Mohan Da**—the master artisan who had been sculpting the Choudhurys' Durga idol for as long as Anirban could remember.

Dressed in his usual white dhoti and a faded cotton shawl, Mohan Da was a man of few words but deep wisdom. His hands, calloused from years of shaping clay, held a brush as he added delicate details to one of the asuras at the goddess's feet. Despite his age, his eyes remained sharp, filled with an intensity that mirrored the very idols he created. Spotting Anirban, Mohan Da wiped his hands on his shawl and gave a small nod.

"Ei Anirban! Ebaro chole esechis? (Ah, Anirban! You've come again this year?)" he greeted, his voice carrying the warmth of familiarity.

"Ami ki ar miss korte pari? (How could I miss it?)" Anirban grinned, stepping closer. "This puja isn't the same without your idols, Mohan Da."

The old artisan chuckled, shaking his head. "Ebar Durga'r chokh ami nijer haatei dibo. Ei bochhor onno kono shilpi ke dite dibo na." (This time, I will paint the Goddess's eyes with my own hands. I won't let any other artisan do it this year.)"

There was a strange finality in his voice, something that made Anirban pause for a second. He had known Mohan Da for years, seen him work through countless pujas, but there was something different in his demeanor today—a quiet resolve, almost like a

farewell. Before Anirban could question it, a familiar voice interrupted.

“Anirban! Tui eshe gechish?”

Turning around, he saw Supriya Choudhury, dressed in a deep red cotton saree, walking towards him with a welcoming smile. Behind her, Riya followed, her hands full of puja decorations. His heart skipped a beat.

It had been months since he had last seen her, but something about the festive glow on her face, the way she absentmindedly tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, made it impossible for him to look away.

Riya caught his gaze and raised an eyebrow. “What? No greeting for me?”

Anirban smirked. “Shubho Mahalaya, Riya.”

She rolled her eyes playfully. “That’s better.”

Supriya, oblivious to the unspoken tension between them, clasped her hands together. “Come inside, Anirban. The rituals will begin soon.”

As he followed them into the grand courtyard, he stole one last glance at Mohan Da. The old artisan had already returned to his work, but his hands trembled slightly as he mixed the paint for the Goddess’s eyes.

Anirban didn’t know why, but an uneasy feeling settled in his chest —as if this year’s puja would not be like the ones before.

The Choudhury mansion was alive with festivity, the air thick with the scent of sandalwood, marigolds, and freshly lit incense. The grand courtyard, the thakur dalan, was decked with garlands, flickering oil lamps, and intricate alpana designs adorning the marble floor. The first day of Durga Puja had begun, and anticipation thrummed through the air like the steady beats of the dhak, growing louder and faster with each passing hour.

Inside the grand hall, Indranil Choudhury stood overseeing the final arrangements, dressed in a crisp kurta, his face glowing with quiet pride. Near the temple area, Riya, draped in a rich crimson saree,

carefully arranged fresh flowers for the evening rituals, stealing occasional glances toward the entrance as though waiting for someone.

Supriya, ever the perfectionist, was in her element—giving instructions, ensuring everything was in place. The *pran pratistha* was scheduled for the next day, and nothing could be left incomplete.

Just as she was about to light the evening lamps before the idol, her eyes fell on the offerings laid before the goddess. A flicker of worry crossed her face.

She turned toward one of the household staff. “Where is the sindoor? And the bel leaves? I asked for them this morning!”

The younger maid hesitated, eyes darting toward the others before stammering, “Didi, I thought… I thought they were already arranged.”

Supriya pressed her lips together, exhaling sharply. The priest had specifically mentioned the necessity of these items for the following day’s rituals. Without them, the *pran pratistha* would be incomplete. There was no time to waste.

Turning to Indranil, she said, “I’ll go to the Kalighat market and get them myself.”

Indranil frowned. “Why do you need to go? The market will be packed today. I’ll send someone.”

But Supriya was already tying her dupatta properly over her shoulder. “I know exactly what’s needed, and I don’t want any mistakes. It won’t take long.”

From across the hall, Riya looked up from her flower arrangements. “I can come with you.”

Supriya smiled, shaking her head. “No need, Riya. You stay and help with the evening rituals. I’ll be back soon.”

With that, she picked up her purse and stepped out, disappearing into the golden hue of the setting sun. The sounds of conch shells and distant mantras followed her as she walked toward the crowded streets.

The evening air was thick with the scent of incense and marigolds. The Choudhury mansion buzzed with celebration—laughter, the rhythmic beats of the dhak, and the distant hum of mantras blending into an almost hypnotic symphony. Anirban stood at the edge of the courtyard, watching the final touches being given to the grand Durga idol. Mohan Da wiped his hands on his dhoti and sighed. “Every year, the same cycle, babu… yet this year feels… heavier.”

Anirban frowned. “Heavier? What do you mean?”

Mohan Da simply shook his head, his wrinkled face unreadable. “Nothing. Just old bones speaking nonsense.” He patted the idol gently, as if in silent prayer.

Before Anirban could press further, Indranil’s voice called from across the courtyard.

“Mohan Da! Baba wants to speak with you.”

The artisan gave a slow nod. “Let me pack up first. I have some work to finish tonight.”

Anirban watched as Mohan Da wiped his tools, packed them into his worn-out jute bag, and slung it over his shoulder. “I’ll be leaving after speaking with Malik,” he murmured. Mohan Da had always been a man of few words. Minutes passed. The rituals continued. The mansion was filled with guests.

Somewhere in the distance, a conch shell blew.

Before he could think further, his phone vibrated. Glancing at the screen—his editor. He hesitated. It was his night off, but something told him to answer.

“Sir?”

The voice on the other end was tense. “Anirban, where are you?”

“At the Choudhurys’. Why?”

A pause. Then— “There’s been a murder at Kalighat market. Just happened.”

Anirban’s breath hitched.

“Kalighat market.”

His grip on the phone tightened.

“Who?”

“Not confirmed yet. But…” His editor exhaled sharply. “Witnesses say it was a woman, mid-twenties, wearing a green saree with a red border.”

Anirban felt the blood drain from his face.

“A green saree with a red border.”

The same one Supriya was wearing when she left. He turned sharply, scanning the mansion, his heartbeat a deafening drum in his ears. His eyes darted across the courtyard—guests, servants, family members… but no Supriya. His gaze landed on Indranil.

“Where is Supriya?” His voice came out sharper than intended.

Indranil, caught off guard, frowned. “She—she went to Kalighat market to get some puja items. She should be back by now—”

A chill ran down Anirban’s spine. She should be back. But she wasn’t.

Outside, the sound of conch shells echoed through the air, signaling the beginning of the evening rituals. The festival continued. The city was alive. But at that moment, for Anirban, the world had gone silent.

The rhythmic beats of the dhak echoed through the Choudhury mansion as the evening rituals commenced. The air was thick with the fragrance of *chandan, dhuno,* and fresh flowers, wrapping the house in an aura of devotion and celebration. Yet, amidst this divine chaos, a gnawing unease had settled in Anirban’s chest. He checked his phone again. No messages from Supriya. His editor’s words played on repeat in his mind. “A woman in a green saree with a red border”. It could be someone else. It had to be someone else. Yet, something in his gut told him otherwise.

His hands trembled slightly as he looked around the courtyard. Indranil was occupied with guests, and Riya was laughing softly at something an elderly relative said. The night carried on, oblivious to the weight settling in Anirban’s stomach. Without a word, he turned and hurried towards the mansion gates. The streets outside were alive with festivity, but his focus was singular—Kalighat Market.

The market was usually a place of color and commotion, especially on a night like this. Vendors shouting, children running, women bargaining for last-minute festival essentials. But tonight, in a secluded alley behind the main street, there was only a cold, unsettling silence. Anirban pushed through the small crowd that had gathered, flashing his press ID to the on-duty constable. The officer hesitated, then stepped aside, allowing him a clear view of the lifeless body lying amidst scattered flowers and trampled ritual items. His breath hitched. It was her.

Supriya lay on the damp ground, her body twisted unnaturally, arranged in a chillingly familiar way. Her arms outstretched, her legs positioned in a way that resembled the idols of Goddess Durga during immersion. The parallel was disturbing, deliberate.

Her saree was soaked in blood, the once vibrant green now darkened with thick crimson. Multiple stab wounds marred her torso, her bangles shattered around her wrists, the red vermillion from her forehead smeared across her face as though someone had deliberately wiped it. Anirban's knees nearly gave way.

The sound of conch shells and hymns from the temples in the background felt like a cruel contrast to the brutality before him. A shiver ran down his spine. This wasn't just a murder. It was a message. A warning. But from whom? And why?

Anirban stood motionless, his eyes locked onto Supriya's lifeless form. The blood pooling around her, the eerie way her body was arranged—everything about the scene sent a chill down his spine. The constables spoke in hushed voices, and the forensic team moved around, carefully placing evidence markers, but their presence felt distant, like white noise in the background. Anirban was trapped in the grotesque reality before him. His phone buzzed in his pocket. He barely had the strength to glance at the screen—Editor (Times Group) .He swallowed hard and answered.

"Anirban, I need you on this case," his editor's voice was firm, leaving no room for negotiation. "A woman found murdered near Kalighat, her body arranged like an idol—this isn't just any homicide. It's ritualistic. It's symbolic."

Anirban's fingers tightened around his phone. "I know."

There was a pause on the other end. "You're already there, aren't you?"

Anirban exhaled sharply. "Yes."

Another pause, this time heavier. "Then you know this is big."

He did.

Murders weren't uncommon in Kolkata, but this—this was something far more sinister. This wasn't just a crime; it was a statement. Someone wanted to be seen. Someone wanted to be feared.

"I want full coverage. Every detail. No one else gets to this before

we do," the editor instructed. "You've got the instincts. I trust you'll find the truth."

The truth.

Anirban's gaze fell back on Supriya's face, now drained of life. What truth had she uncovered that got her killed? His heart pounded against his ribs. He had come to celebrate Durga Puja, but now he was standing in the middle of something far darker. And somehow, he knew —this was only the beginning.

As Anirban turned away from the crime scene, the faint scent of burning incense mixed with the metallic tang of blood. His eyes landed on something half-buried in the dirt beside Supriya's hand. A small, crumpled piece of paper. He crouched down and carefully picked it up, unfolding it with trembling fingers. A sketch of an old temple. The lines were rough, hurried. But the structure was unmistakable. His breath caught in his throat. He had seen this temple before. It was the same one from his mother's old notes.

The same temple she was last seen walking towards… before she vanished twenty-five years ago.

Chapter 3: The Gathering Storm

The Choudhury mansion, which had been a beacon of celebration just hours ago, now stood in eerie silence, its grand halls heavy with grief. The scent of incense still lingered in the air, mixing unnervingly with the metallic tang of fear. The sound of conch shells and dhak drums, which had filled the night with festivity, had stopped—leaving behind an unsettling void, as if even the gods were mourning.

The news of Supriya's murder had spread through the household like wildfire, turning joy into a nightmare. The sacred fire that had been burning in the courtyard was now reduced to embers, flickering weakly, as if struggling to stay alive in the face of tragedy.

Indranil Choudhury stood motionless at the center of the hall, his expression a mixture of shock, disbelief, and something else—something unreadable. His knuckles were white from gripping the edge of a wooden chair, as if holding onto it was the only thing keeping him upright. His lips trembled before he finally spoke, his voice hoarse.

"How… how did this happen?" he asked, though it sounded more like a whisper to himself than a question directed at anyone. Anirban watched him closely. His reaction—though expected—felt off. There was sorrow, but was there also guilt? Or fear?

Riya, standing near the entrance, let out a strangled gasp, her hands flying to her mouth. "No… this can't be true." Tears welled in her eyes as she gripped the fabric of her saree. "She just went to the

market… she was just…" Her voice broke, and she covered her face, shoulders shaking violently.

The entire mansion had erupted into whispers, the household staff exchanging fearful glances. The elders of the family murmured prayers under their breath, seeking divine intervention.

"She was like a daughter to this house," an elderly woman sobbed. "Who would do such a thing? On the first day of the festival?"

"The gods are angry," another murmured. "This is a bad omen."

Indranil suddenly turned to Anirban, his voice sharp. "You were there, weren't you?"

Anirban met his gaze. "Yes." He took a breath. "By the time I reached, it was too late."

Indranil clenched his jaw and looked away. Anirban caught the flicker of something in his eyes—something beyond grief. Was it reluctance? Or something darker?

The weight of Supriya's murder pressed heavily on Anirban's chest, but he knew grief alone wouldn't lead him to the truth. The puzzle had only just begun, and every detail mattered. The image of her lifeless body, arranged like the goddess she had once worshipped, haunted him. It wasn't just a killing—it was a message. But from whom? And why?

Back at his apartment, Anirban spread out his notes, his mother's old journal lying open beside them. The sketch of the goddess—eerily similar to how Supriya had been found—stared back at him. His fingers traced the lines, his mind racing. This couldn't be a coincidence. Somewhere, hidden in the past, was a thread connecting it all.

The second day of Durga Puja arrived with even more grandeur. The Choudhury mansion seemed as if it had lost its charm, beneath the surface, grief and unease lingered. The air carried the scent of incense and fresh flowers, yet it couldn't mask the tension growing within the household.

Anirban knew he wouldn't find answers sitting in his apartment. He grabbed his notepad, pocketed his mother's old journal, and stepped

out into the city that now held secrets he was determined to uncover.

Anirban wandered through the mansion, every detail sharpened by the weight of Supriya's absence, which hung heavily in the air. In the courtyard, mourners gathered to honor her, following Hindu mourning rituals steeped in tradition. Supriya's photograph, garlanded with flowers and marked with a tilak, stood at the center of a small altar, surrounded by incense and flickering diyas. Attendees, dressed in white, sat on the floor, some chanting prayers or verses from scriptures to guide her soul. The gathering was a blend of solemn reflection and shared memories, as those who loved her prepared to bid farewell in accordance with the timeless customs of their faith.

He wasn't here to mourn. He was here to investigate.

As he made his way to the courtyard, he found Mohan Da seated under a large banyan tree, carefully painting the goddess's ornaments. The old artisan seemed unbothered by the turmoil surrounding him, his hands steady, his focus unwavering.

"Mohan Da," Anirban began, his voice soft but earnest, "I heard the celebrations were cancelled. Yet you're still working… Is there a reason?"

Mohan Da did not look up, his brush gliding smoothly over the idol's golden armlet. "The rituals may pause, beta, but devotion does not. The goddess's grace is needed now more than ever." His tone was gentle, almost paternal. "Supriya would have insisted we honor tradition, even in grief. You know how she was."

Anirban watched Mohan Da's steady hands as they traced intricate golden patterns on the idol's armlet. The artisan's devotion had always been unshaken, but today, there was something else in his demeanor—something calculated.

"You say Supriya would have wanted this," Anirban said, studying the old man's face. "But do you really believe she died because it was her fate?"

Mohan Da exhaled through his nose, placing the brush delicately into a small bowl of water. He wiped his hands on his dhoti before finally meeting Anirban's gaze. "Do you know the true nature of

power, beta?" he asked, voice calm yet piercing. "It's not always in who commands it, but in who wishes to hide it."

Anirban frowned. "What are you trying to say?"

Mohan Da leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "The Choudhurys are not as they seem. Their wealth, their status—it comes at a price. Old houses carry old secrets. And sometimes, those secrets demand blood."

Anirban's muscles tensed. "Are you saying someone from the Choudhury family—"

Before he could finish, a voice rang out from across the courtyard.

"Mohan Da! Dadu is asking for you."

A young servant stood at the edge of the gathering, hands folded. Mohan Da sighed, rising to his feet with surprising ease for a man of his age. He turned back to Anirban, his wrinkled face unreadable.

"You are looking for answers, beta, but be careful. Sometimes, when you dig too deep, the ground gives way beneath your feet."

With that, he walked away, leaving Anirban standing amidst the echoes of chanting prayers and the flickering light of the diyas.

As he watched Mohan Da disappear into the mansion, memories came flooding back.

Mohan Da had always been there.

After his mother's death, when his world had shattered and he had been left with nothing but questions, it was Mohan Da who had guided him. Not with grand gestures, but with quiet wisdom. The old artisan had taught him how to carve small idols, how to lose himself in the rhythm of creation when grief became unbearable.

As a child, Anirban had spent countless evenings sitting beside him, covered in flecks of paint and clay dust, listening to stories about gods and demons, fate and destiny. In those moments, Mohan Da had been more than just an artisan—he had been a guardian, a mentor, a steady presence in a life that had felt rudderless.

Anirban turned his attention back to the mansion. If Mohan Da wanted him to look at the Choudhurys, then he would. And there

was no better place to start than Indranil. He found him in the study, standing near a tall wooden cabinet filled with old manuscripts and family records. The room was dimly lit, and Indranil was staring at a glass of whiskey in his hand, swirling it absentmindedly. His eyes were bloodshot, his face worn with exhaustion.

Anirban stepped inside. “You didn’t come to the mourning ceremony.”

Indranil flinched slightly but didn’t turn. “Didn’t feel the need to put on a performance.”

“That’s an odd way to describe honoring your wife,” Anirban said carefully, stepping closer. “Supriya’s gone, Indranil. Shouldn’t you want to know why?”

A bitter chuckle escaped Indranil’s lips. He downed the whiskey in one sharp gulp and set the glass down with more force than necessary. “You think I don’t already know?”

Anirban stilled. “What do you mean?”

Indranil finally turned to face him, his expression unreadable. “Some things are bigger than us, Anirban. Some things are set in motion long before we’re even born.”

His words sent a chill down Anirban’s spine. There was something in the way he spoke—like he wasn’t just grieving but afraid. Afraid of what? Or… of whom?

Anirban took a step closer. “Indranil… are you saying you knew Supriya was going to die?”

Indranil clenched his jaw, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “I think you should leave.”

“You’re hiding something,” Anirban pressed. “If you know something about what happened to Supriya—”

Indranil’s temper flared. “I said, leave.”

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The air between them was thick with something unspoken, something suffocating. And then Anirban turned and walked away. Because he didn’t need to

push further. He already had his answer. Indranil was involved. And if he was scared… that meant there was something far more dangerous at play than just a simple murder. Something dark. Something deadly. And Anirban was now caught right in the middle of it.

Anirban didn't leave the study immediately. Instead, he lingered in the dim hallway outside, watching as Indranil slumped into the leather chair behind his desk, his head in his hands. His behavior was erratic—his words, cryptic. But Anirban couldn't accuse him outright. Not yet.

As he stepped into the main hall, he spotted Riya near the entrance, standing with her arms crossed. The light from the courtyard cast a soft glow on her face, making the gold embroidery on her dupatta shimmer faintly.

"You were talking to Indranil?" she asked, her voice low but sharp.

Anirban nodded. "He's hiding something."

Riya scoffed. "That's hardly news. The entire Choudhury family has mastered the art of secrecy."

Anirban glanced back toward the study. "He's afraid. And whatever he's afraid of—it's not the police, or even me. It's something else."

Riya's gaze flickered with unease. "What did Mohan Da say?"

Anirban hesitated. "He pointed me toward Indranil. But now I wonder if that was just a way to keep me occupied."

Riya frowned. "Mohan Da isn't someone who just 'points' fingers. He always has a reason."

Anirban sighed. "I know. But what if this time, he's wrong? Or worse—what if he's leading me away from the real truth?"

Riya stepped closer, her voice softening. "You trust him, don't you?"

Anirban let out a dry chuckle. "I did. Maybe I still do." He met her eyes. "But you know how it is, Riya. The people closest to us are the ones we never question. And that's exactly how they get away with things."

She tilted her head slightly, watching him. “Is that why you keep your distance from people?”

Anirban smirked. “Who said I keep my distance?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh, please. You’re like a locked diary—full of secrets, but too damn stubborn to let anyone read past the cover.”

Anirban chuckled, shaking his head. “You think you know me that well?”

Riya held his gaze. “I know you better than you think.”

For a brief moment, the weight of the investigation faded. The tension in his shoulders eased. He had known Riya for years, but in moments like this, when her sharp tongue softened just enough to let warmth through, he wondered what it would be like if things were different—if they weren’t standing in the middle of a crumbling legacy, chasing ghosts and shadows. But before he could say anything, a voice echoed through the hall.

“Mohan Da!”

They both turned.

A servant rushed past them toward the courtyard, where Mohan Da had been sitting earlier. Something was wrong. Anirban and Riya exchanged a glance before hurrying after him. In the courtyard, they found Mohan Da standing near the Durga idol, his hands still stained with paint. But his usual calm expression was gone. Anirban immediately noticed the way his fingers trembled slightly at his sides.

“What happened?” he asked.

Mohan Da looked at him, his face pale under the flickering light of the oil lamps. “There’s something you should see,” he murmured.

Anirban’s stomach twisted. “What is it?”

Mohan Da exhaled shakily and turned toward the idol. The goddess’s face was nearly complete, the paint fresh. But there, smeared across her golden lips, was something dark.

Something red.

Blood.

Riya let out a sharp breath. “What the hell—?”

Anirban took a step closer, his mind racing.

This wasn’t an accident. It was a warning. And it meant only one thing. Someone else was next.

Chapter 4: Shadows

The morning of Tritiya arrived with a dense fog blanketing the city, an unusual occurrence for this time of year. The sun struggled to pierce through the mist, casting an eerie glow over the Choudhury mansion. Anirban sat on the balcony of his room, sipping a cup of tea that had long gone cold. His mind replayed the conversation with Indranil from the previous night—his nervous stammer, the hesitation in his voice, and the unspoken weight in his eyes.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. He turned to see Riya standing there, her presence bringing an inexplicable sense of comfort amid the chaos. Her hair was loosely tied, strands escaping to frame her face, and her eyes held a determination he had grown to admire.

“Didn't sleep again, did you?” she asked, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation.

Anirban sighed, rubbing his temple. “Not much. There's too much to piece together. Indranil knows something, Riya. He’s hiding something—”

“I know,” she interrupted, sitting across from him. “But what if it's not just him? What if there's more to this than what we see?”

Her words lingered in the air, heavy with implication. Anirban leaned forward, intrigued. “What do you mean?”

Riya pulled out a small notebook from her bag. “Supriya used to keep a list of all the ritualistic items for Durga Puja. Last night, while helping clean her things, I found a torn page hidden in one of her books. It mentioned something about Kalighat and a secret pact.” She slid the page across the table. “Have you ever heard of this before?”

Anirban scanned the paper. The handwriting was hurried, almost frantic. The words ‘Kalighat, near Hooghly river’ were underlined twice, followed by an incomplete sentence— ‘The pact must not be…’ before the ink trailed off.

“Kalighat…” Anirban whispered, his pulse quickening. “That’s where Supriya was last seen alive. But what does a pact have to do with it?”

Riya exhaled sharply. “I don’t know, but Supriya clearly thought it was important. And if she did, then maybe it got her killed.”

The weight of the realization settled between them. The murders weren’t random. There was a deeper connection between Supriya’s death and the traditions of the Choudhurys, one that had been carefully hidden in plain sight.

That night, unable to shake off the unease, Anirban decided to follow Indranil. His gut told him that the man was involved in something sinister, and he needed proof.

The streets of Kolkata were eerily quiet at this late hour, save for the distant ringing of a tram bell and the occasional murmur of a street vendor closing shop. Anirban followed Indranil from a careful distance, his pulse steady but alert. Indranil walked with hurried steps, his shoulders tense, constantly glancing over his shoulder.

The narrow lanes twisted and turned, guiding them away from the main road and into the depths of the old city. Anirban knew these streets well, yet tonight they felt unfamiliar—cloaked in an unsettling silence. Somewhere nearby, the faint sound of temple bells echoed through the misty air, mingling with the rhythmic splash of the Hooghly River against the ghats.

Indranil turned abruptly into a dimly lit alley, his pace quickening. Anirban pressed himself against a crumbling brick wall, waiting for a heartbeat before following. The alley was lined with half-broken shrines and old, forgotten homes, their windows gaping like the hollow eyes of skulls.

Then, suddenly—Indranil disappeared.

Anirban’s breath caught. He hurried forward, scanning the alley, his heartbeat thundering in his ears. A moment ago, Indranil had been

right in front of him. Now, he is gone.

A flicker of movement to his left.

Anirban barely had time to react before Indranil lunged from the shadows, grabbing him by the collar and shoving him hard against the wall. “Why are you following me?” he hissed, his face contorted with panic and fury.

Anirban clenched his jaw, meeting his gaze. “Because you’re hiding something, Indranil. And I need to know what it is.”

Indranil’s grip faltered for a second, but he didn’t let go. His breath came in sharp, ragged bursts. “You don’t understand,” he whispered, his voice shaking. “You shouldn’t be here.”

A rustling sound from the end of the alley made them both freeze. Indranil turned his head sharply, his face draining of color. Without warning, he released Anirban and bolted.

Anirban wasted no time and took off after him.

The chase led them through the tangled streets of old Kolkata, past shuttered shops and sleeping dogs that stirred at the sudden movement. Indranil ran with reckless desperation, knocking over a crate of clay lamps as he turned sharply into another alley. Anirban leaped over the scattered shards, pushing his legs harder.

They crossed a deserted crossing, the glow of a lone streetlamp casting elongated shadows on the pavement. Indranil’s breathing was ragged now, but he didn’t slow down. He sprinted past an old temple—Kalighat.

Anirban caught a glimpse of a lone priest standing at the temple steps, watching them with narrowed eyes.

But there was no time to focus on him.

Indranil veered left, heading straight for the riverbank. Anirban pushed himself forward, reaching out—just inches away.

Then, Indranil made a mistake.

His foot caught on a loose stone, and he stumbled forward, crashing onto the damp earth near the ghats. Anirban lunged, pinning him down before he could get up.

“Talk,” he demanded, his voice sharp. “What the hell are you running from?”

Indranil’s chest heaved as he stared at Anirban with wide, terrified eyes. But then, something changed. His fear twisted into something else. A cold smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

“Funny,” he said, almost breathless. “You think you have it all figured out, don’t you?”

Anirban narrowed his eyes. “Supriya’s death wasn’t an accident,” he said, watching him closely. “And you know it.”

Indranil let out a breathless chuckle. “Do you?”

His voice was unsettlingly calm now, his earlier panic replaced with something unreadable. Anirban tightened his grip on his collar, feeling a chill creep up his spine.

“You were the last one to see her alive,” Anirban pressed. “And you’ve been acting like a man with blood on his hands ever since.”

Indranil’s smirk vanished. For a brief second, something flickered in his eyes—something dark, something dangerous.

Then, a distant sound—a bicycle bell ringing somewhere in the fog—broke the moment. Indranil seized the distraction, shoving Anirban away with a force that sent him stumbling back.

By the time Anirban regained his footing, Indranil was already gone. He stood there, breathless, his pulse pounding. The river lapped softly against the ghats, and in the distance, the temple bells rang once more. Something was wrong.

Anirban had suspected Indranil before—but now, after this encounter, it felt like a certainty. The way he ran, the way he smirked at the accusation, the way he looked at him in the end—like he was hiding something far worse than fear.

Anirban exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair.

If Indranil was behind Supriya’s murder, then he needed to prove it. Before it was too late.

The fourth night of Durga Puja had cast a pall over the Choudhury mansion. The once-vibrant corridors were now hushed, filled with

murmurs of grief and anxiety. Supriya's death had transformed the once-celebratory atmosphere into a somber vigil. In every corner, mourners wept silently; the air was heavy with the scent of incense and the lingering aroma of fresh marigold garlands that now seemed to mock the loss.

Inside the mansion, Anirban moved through the quiet corridors until he reached a modest sitting area, where Riya was seated by a window, her gaze distant yet resolute. He approached her slowly.

"Riya," Anirban began, his tone low and troubled, "I followed Indranil last night. I saw him in an alley near Kalighat—meeting with a priest in crimson robes. It… it felt wrong."

Riya looked up sharply, worry etching her features. "Indranil? I've noticed he's been unusually secretive lately. But a priest? That's not something I'd expect him to be involved with, not here, at least."

Anirban sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I can't make sense of it. Everything points to something deeper, something that might be connected to Supriya's death. I need to know if there's more behind his actions."

Before Riya could reply, footsteps echoed down the corridor. Siddharth Choudhury entered—a young man whose quiet presence was heavy with loss. His eyes, dark and reflective, betrayed the pain of having lost his mother. He rarely attended these gatherings, preferring solitude in the wake of tragedy, but tonight he had come, drawn by the same need for answers.

Siddharth's gaze fell on Anirban and Riya as he approached. "Good evening," he said in a measured tone. There was no pretense in his voice—just the raw honesty of grief and resignation.

Anirban nodded respectfully. "Siddharth, I'm trying to understand what happened. I saw something last night—your father, Indranil, was out in an alley near Kalighat, and I witnessed him meeting with a priest. I can't shake the feeling that it's connected to Supriya's death."

Siddharth's face hardened slightly. He shifted his gaze downward before answering, "I'm not in a position to discuss family matters tonight. There are things about our past that are better left unspoken." His voice was low, edged with both sorrow and an

unyielding reserve.

“But don’t you think,” Anirban pressed gently, “that if your father is hiding something, it might be the very cause of all this?” His eyes searched Siddharth’s for any sign of truth.

Siddharth’s jaw tightened, and after a long pause he said, “There are secrets in this family that have been buried for years. I don’t have the answers you seek, and I’m not willing to speculate further.” His tone was careful, even as the pain of loss shone in his eyes. “I only know that our lives have been changed forever by what’s happened.”

Riya’s expression softened as she reached out to place a comforting hand on Siddharth’s arm. “We all feel the weight of it, Siddharth. But running from the truth won’t bring her back.”

Siddharth shook his head slowly, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Some truths are too painful to unearth,” he murmured.

The conversation hung in the air, heavy with unsaid words and unshared secrets. Anirban felt the frustration of unanswered questions gnaw at him, but he understood the pain behind Siddharth’s guarded silence.

Later that night, unable to quell the mounting questions, Anirban sought solace in a quiet, secluded study at the back of the mansion. There, away from prying eyes, he found Mohan Da, the venerable artisan who had been a constant in his life for as long as he could remember. Mohan Da’s presence had always been a source of quiet reassurance—like a lighthouse in the midst of a turbulent sea.

Anirban hesitated at first, unsure if he should burden the old man with the dark discoveries of the previous night. Finally, as the shadows deepened and the murmurs of the mansion faded into a sorrowful hush, he stepped into the small room.

“Mohan Da,” Anirban began softly, his voice trembling slightly. “I… I need to tell you something. Last night, I followed Indranil. I saw him in a narrow alley near

Kalighat. His behaviour was really suspicious. He was going in an isolated alley, most probably to meet someone. Before he could, he noticed that I was following him. I also saw a priest, somehow I feel

that he is connected to all this. The priest's robes were a deep crimson, and his face was smeared with vermilion. It… it felt like a sign, something ominous."

Mohan Da's weathered face remained impassive for a long moment as he listened. The old man's eyes, reflecting years of silent knowledge, met Anirban's. For a moment, the room was filled only with the sound of Anirban's unsteady breathing.

Finally, Mohan Da spoke in a measured tone, "Anirban, my boy, there are forces at work in this world that have long been hidden from our eyes. Sometimes, the paths we walk are shrouded in shadows, and not every truth is meant to be fully revealed to us." He paused, his voice softening. "Do you truly wish to pursue this, knowing that it might bring more pain than answers?"

Anirban's heart pounded. "I have to, Mohan Da," he said, his voice resolute despite the tremor of uncertainty. "If Indranil is involved in Supriya's death… if that priest is part of this, I need to know what it all means."

Mohan Da looked at him for a long, silent moment before finally saying, "Then be cautious, my child. Sometimes, the path to truth is lined with peril, and the Goddess, in her infinite wisdom, will take care of those who are meant to bear the burden. But remember—some mysteries are not for us to forcefully unravel."

Anirban's mind churned with conflicted emotions. He respected Mohan Da, but he could not ignore the sinister clues that were emerging from every corner. As he left the study and stepped back into the echoing corridors of the mansion, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

Outside, the night grew deeper, and the faint toll of temple bells reverberated through the still air. In that moment, as Anirban stood alone in the dim light, he felt the weight of a secret too vast to comprehend—a secret that might soon upend everything he thought he knew.

And as the cold wind whispered through the ancient walls, a single, haunting thought echoed in his mind:

"What price will the truth demand?"

Chapter 5: Blood and Whispers

The morning air was thick with the scent of incense and marigold, a stark contrast to the ominous silence that loomed over the Choudhury mansion. It was Panchami, the fifth day of Durga Puja, and the final day of mourning for the family. Yet, an unsettling air lingered, as if something foreboding awaited in the shadows, pressing down on the house like an unseen force. The once vibrant mansion, adorned for the festival, now carried a suffocating stillness, as though the very walls were absorbing the grief that had settled within them. The grand chandeliers, which once illuminated the lavish halls, seemed dimmer, the flickering flames of the lamps casting long, wavering shadows that danced like restless spirits.

Anirban arrived at the mansion, his footsteps echoing through the hollow space as he stepped past the ornate iron gates. His presence was met with subdued nods and weary faces, their expressions drained from days of mourning. The guests who had come to pay their respects were slowly leaving, their hushed voices blending with the distant ringing of temple bells. The air carried the faint remnants of whispered condolences, of murmured prayers for the departed. Servants moved like ghosts through the hallways, their gazes lowered, their footsteps careful, as if afraid to disturb the heavy sorrow that lay over the house.

The rituals of mourning had been performed, yet grief clung stubbornly to the air, refusing to dissipate. It seeped into the very foundation of the house, embedding itself into the grand pillars, the carved wooden furniture, the embroidered tapestries that once held stories of laughter and warmth. Now, they bore only the weight of

loss. The absence of Indranil was not just felt—it was tangible, a void that refused to be ignored.

Siddarth stood motionless near the entrance, his presence almost blending into the lifeless ambiance of the mansion. His shoulders were hunched under an invisible burden, his body rigid as though weighed down by something far heavier than grief alone. His eyes, once alight with sharp intellect and quiet confidence, now looked hollow—empty pools of darkness, lost in an abyss of sorrow too deep for words. He had lost too much in too little time, and it showed in the lifelessness of his posture, in the way his hands remained clenched by his sides, as if trying to hold on to something—anything—that could anchor him to reality.

A soft gust of wind swept through the open courtyard, making the marigold garlands sway gently, their vibrant orange petals contrasting starkly against the mourning drapery. The scent of incense thickened, curling around the dimly lit space, wrapping it in an eerie stillness. Somewhere, in the farthest corners of the house, the faint chime of a wind bell echoed, its delicate melody haunting in the suffocating quiet. It was as though the mansion itself was holding its breath, waiting for something—something inevitable.

And then, the silence shattered.

A scream.

Piercing, raw, filled with a terror that sent a jolt through Anirban's spine.

Everything shifted in an instant.

The house, which had been steeped in grief, suddenly became alive with panic. Footsteps thundered across the halls. Gasps of fear and confusion rippled through the departing guests. The scream had come from inside the temple.

And as Anirban rushed forward, dread curling in his gut, he knew—whatever had been lurking in the shadows had finally revealed itself.

Heartbeats raced, pounding like war drums against ribcages, as feet pounded against the cold marble floor. The desperate rush toward

the temple doors felt endless, each step heavier with dread. The doors stood ajar, swaying slightly, as if disturbed by something unseen—something that had just left, or perhaps, something that still lingered. The air was thick with the scent of sandalwood and camphor, sacred and familiar, but beneath it, something foul lurked. A metallic tang clung to every breath, sharp and unmistakable. The scent of blood.

Inside, Riya stood frozen. Her hands trembled violently at her sides, her fingers twitching like a marionette abandoned mid-motion. Her chest rose and fell in rapid, shallow breaths. Her lips quivered, but no words came. Her eyes—wide, unblinking, and filled with unfiltered horror—were fixated on something ahead.

And then they saw it.

Indranil.

His body lay sprawled beneath the grand idol of Goddess Durga, grotesquely replacing Mahishasura, as if he had been cast into the role of the vanquished demon. But this was no divine play, no ceremonial reenactment. This was something else. Something wrong.

His limbs were twisted at unnatural angles, the bones beneath his flesh jarring against the skin, protruding in sharp, unnatural lines. His fingers, curled into stiff, claw-like formations, seemed frozen mid-scream, mid-resistance. His neck—oh God, his neck—was bent at a sickening degree, as though it had been wrenched with inhuman force, his head barely holding onto his shoulders. His lifeless eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, reflecting the flickering golden glow of the temple lamps, unseeing, yet filled with an eternal echo of suffering.

The blood.

It was everywhere.

But not in the way one might expect.

It had not splattered chaotically. It had not erupted in wild, mindless sprays. No, it moved with purpose. It slithered across the cold marble floor, forming intricate patterns—patterns that felt deliberate, ancient, ritualistic. The deep red trails coiled and curled,

stretching outward from his body like veins, like roots digging into the earth, as though they were etching something unseen into the sacred ground. The lines connected, forming symbols—foreign, unreadable, but carrying an ominous weight, something that sent a visceral chill through every onlooker.

And his wounds—God, his wounds.

Deep, jagged slashes marred his torso, but they weren't haphazard. They were carved. Precise. As if someone—something—had taken its time, shaping them with ritualistic intent. His chest had been brutally torn open, the cracked remains of his ribcage barely visible beneath the gaping wound. His abdomen was a cavern of raw, torn flesh, the edges of the injury too clean for an accident, too calculated for mere violence. It was a contradiction that made Anirban's skin crawl—mutilation with purpose. Horror with intent.

His hands.

Oh, his hands.

They bore gashes, deep and violent, his fingers frozen in an anguished grasp, as though he had fought—fought with something unseen, something beyond the comprehension of the living. There were scratch marks on the floor beside him, long, desperate gouges in the marble, as if he had been dragged—dragged into position.

For a moment, no one spoke.

No one moved.

The temple, once a place of sanctity and devotion, had become a shrine to something else entirely.

Something dark.

Something unspeakable.

The goddess loomed above them all, her divine form bathed in the flickering light, her expression unchanging, eternal, indifferent. The golden tip of her trident gleamed, reflecting the horror below. And at that moment, Anirban could not shake the feeling that she was watching.

Watching and waiting.

Then, from the farthest shadows of the temple, where the light did not reach, came a sound.

A whisper.

Soft. Almost human.

Almost.

And the flame of a single temple lamp flickered violently, sputtering out.

Darkness crept closer.

And the silence was broken by a slow, deliberate breath.

Something else was here.

And it had not finished yet.

A gasp broke through the oppressive silence. It was Riya.

Her breath hitched, her lips parted, but no words escaped. What was there to say? The horror before them was beyond the grasp of language, beyond the limits of human understanding.

Anirban felt the weight of the moment press down on his chest like an unseen force, suffocating, heavy. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, his fingers numb, his mind screaming at him to move—to look away—to do anything but stand there, frozen in this waking nightmare. But he couldn't. None of them could.

Siddarth stood at the threshold of the temple, his face ashen, his hands clenched into fists so tight that his nails dug deep into his palms, drawing tiny crescents of blood. But he did not feel the pain. He did not feel anything except a hollow, consuming dread. His gaze locked onto Indranil's mangled corpse, and something inside him shattered.

His breath turned ragged, shallow, his body swaying as he took a step forward.

"Pa..pa….." His voice cracked, barely above a whisper.

Anirban's instinct screamed for him to hold Siddarth back, to stop him from going any closer, but his body refused to obey. It was as if the temple itself had swallowed them all into a nightmare realm

where time moved differently—slower, heavier, suffocating.

Then the wind shifted.

A sudden gust swept through the temple, flickering the flames of the brass oil lamps. Shadows danced wildly along the intricately carved walls, twisting and contorting as though possessed by unseen hands. The air turned thick, heavy with something unseen but undeniably present. The silence was no longer empty—it had changed. It was watching, breathing.

Then, a sound.

Soft at first. Almost imperceptible.

A whisper.

A breath.

It slithered through the air, just beneath the range of true hearing, threading itself into the minds of those present like an invasive parasite. It was not one voice but many—layered, overlapping, an unholy symphony of murmurs weaving through the flickering light.

Anirban's throat tightened. He turned sharply, eyes darting across the dimly lit temple, scanning the dark corners, the flickering shadows. But there was nothing. No one.

Then, the lamps sputtered.

One by one, they flickered violently, as if unseen fingers were brushing against the flames. The golden glow dimmed, and in the shifting light, something moved.

Not a shadow.

Not a trick of the light.

Something moved.

Riya let out a strangled cry as the temperature in the temple plummeted, a biting cold replacing the warmth of the ritual fires. Anirban saw his breath curl in the air before him, misting in the sudden chill. The scent of incense was gone, replaced by something stale, rotten.

Then, Indranil moved.

No.

Not Indranil.

His body remained lifeless, broken beneath the idol of Durga. But his lips—torn and bloodied—began to part. The movement was slow, deliberate, unnatural. As though some unseen force were prying them open from within.

The hushed murmurs in the temple grew louder. More distinct.

The blood on the floor began to shift. The intricate patterns that had seemed so eerily deliberate now pulsed, as if the temple itself was alive, breathing through the veins of spilled life.

Then, the whispering stopped.

All at once.

Anirban's ears rang in the suffocating silence.

Then Indranil's mouth—now fully open—let out a sound.

A single, shallow breath.

A breath that should not have been possible.

And then… a single word.

Hoarse. Hollow.

Spoken from lips that should no longer have been able to speak.

"Run."

The moment shattered.

Riya screamed. Anirban stumbled back. Siddarth recoiled, his entire body seizing up as though an invisible hand had gripped his spine. The temple lamps exploded in a burst of flame, casting monstrous, writhing shadows across the walls.

The air became thick, crushing, suffocating, as though the temple itself had drawn its final breath and was now sinking into the abyss.

Then came the footsteps.

Not theirs.

From the farthest end of the temple, from the darkness beyond where the light of the flames could reach, something stepped forward.

The sound was slow. Measured. Each footfall echoed unnaturally, stretching longer than it should have, reverberating as though time itself had fractured.

Then the whispers returned.

Louder.

Clearer.

And this time, they carried one message.

“You shouldn’t have come.”

And the darkness surged forward.

Riya’s shuddering sobs broke the whispers as she collapsed to her knees, her entire body trembling. She had come for the morning rituals, expecting the serene calm that the temple always offered. Instead, she had stumbled into a nightmare she would never forget.

Anirban moved to her side, his presence grounding her as he gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “Riya,” he said softly, his voice steady despite the chaos. “Look at me. Focus on my voice.”

Her breaths came in uneven gasps, her lips quivering. “H-how... who could do this?” she stammered, the question escaping in a voice barely above a whisper.

Anirban didn’t have an answer. His mind was already racing through possibilities, grasping for logic in a situation that seemed to defy it entirely. The prime suspect had now become the victim. The case had turned on its head, the lines blurred beyond recognition. But something about the scene gnawed at him, something beyond the horror, something that didn’t feel random.

His eyes fell back to the blood patterns on the floor.

They were deliberate. Too deliberate.

His breath hitched as he crouched down, his fingers hovering over the strange symbols. These weren’t just splashes of blood; they were

forming something. A shape. A design. A message.

The longer he stared, the more a memory stirred at the edges of his mind. He knew these patterns. He had seen them before. Where?

His pulse quickened. His fingers traced the air above the markings, careful not to disturb them. A sequence. A formation. And then—

Lightning struck his mind.

A fragment of an old, tattered page. A scrawled design in fading ink. A whisper of a bedtime story his mother had once told him.

No.

This wasn't random.

His hands fumbled for his phone. With a shaking grip, he snapped several photos, the soft clicks of the camera cutting through the suffocating silence of the temple. He didn't care if anyone noticed—he had to document this.

A movement at the temple doors made him look up.

Siddarth.

He was standing still, unnervingly still, his face drained of color. His eyes weren't on Indranil's body anymore. They were on the symbols.

The realization settled into Anirban's gut like a stone.

Siddarth recognized them too.

But before he could speak, before he could demand an explanation, the temple lights flickered again. A low creak echoed from the wooden beams above, and the shadows stretched unnaturally, contorting in ways that defied the flames' movement.

The scent of camphor thickened—no, soured.

A gust of wind rushed through the temple, despite the doors being closed. The oil lamps sputtered wildly, their glow turning from warm gold to something colder, harsher.

And for just a second—just a fraction of a breath—Anirban swore he saw something move in the reflection of the temple's brass lamp

stand.

Something that wasn't them.

His skin prickled. The hair at the nape of his neck stood on end.

No. Not now. Not here.

Muttering a quick excuse, he pushed himself up and strode out of the temple, his heart pounding. He needed to confirm this.

The moment he stepped outside, the humid morning air hit him like a wall. But he barely registered it. His feet carried him swiftly down the temple steps, across the narrow, winding alley that led to his apartment. His breathing was uneven, his mind a whirlwind of fragmented memories.

The pattern—he had seen it before.

Where?

The question gnawed at him as he reached his apartment, shoving open the door with a force that rattled the hinges. He didn't bother locking it behind him. He had no time.

Moving with frantic urgency, he dropped to his knees before his bookshelf, fingers digging through the stacks of old files and books. Dust coated his hands as he rifled through forgotten papers, discarded notes, frayed journals.

Then—his fingers brushed against something familiar.

A leather-bound journal, its edges worn with time.

His mother's journal.

He pulled it out with a sharp breath, flipping it open. The yellowed pages crackled under his touch as he turned them feverishly, his eyes scanning the faded ink, the hurried sketches. His mother had always been fascinated by myths, by rituals, by the stories that lurked in the spaces between belief and fear.

Then—there it was.

A page, aged and brittle, filled with an intricate pattern almost identical to the one in the temple.

A chill wrapped around his spine.

His eyes darted to the notes scrawled beside the sketch. The handwriting was familiar, yet it felt distant, like a ghost whispering from the past. He read aloud, his voice a hushed tremor.

“A blood seal… an invocation… a calling…”

He swallowed hard. His mind reeled.

The symbols in the temple weren’t random.

They were part of something ancient. Something intentional.

And worst of all—something unfinished.

A sharp knock at his door made him jump. His breath caught in his throat as he turned. The door remained closed, but the knock had been firm, deliberate. Too deliberate. He hesitated. Then, with a deep breath, he stepped forward and reached for the handle. He turned it.

The door creaked open—slowly, agonizingly slowly.

The hallway outside was empty.

But the air was wrong. Thick. Humming with something unseen. And then—he saw it.

Just beyond the threshold, at the foot of his door— A single, fresh smear of blood. And beneath it, drawn in sharp, deliberate strokes — The same symbol from the temple. His blood turned to ice. The case wasn’t just turning on its head. It was following him.

And whatever had begun in the temple…

Was far from over.

Chapter 6: Veil of Blood

Back at the Choudhury mansion, Riya was making progress of her own. The whispers had grown louder—half-truths, sidelong glances, hushed conversations that ceased when she entered a room. The weight of suspicion pressed on her, but she refused to falter.

She retraced her steps to the temple, forcing herself to look past the blood, the horror, the visceral memory of Indranil's lifeless body. Her mind sought patterns, connections. Something had changed in the mansion long before the murder. She could feel it, an undercurrent of something dark and festering.

Then, she noticed it.

A section of the temple floor, just near the base of the idol, where the blood had dried in jagged rivulets. The marble here was slightly different—less worn than the rest, as if it had been replaced recently. Her fingers traced the edges, her gut telling her that something lay beneath.

A sudden presence behind her made her spin around.

Siddarth.

His face was gaunt, his eyes hollow with grief, yet there was something else there. A flicker of recognition. Of warning.

"You shouldn't be here," he murmured.

She held his gaze. "Neither should Indranil."

His jaw tightened, his hands curling into fists at his sides. "Leave it alone, Riya. For your own sake."

But she had come too far to stop now. And something told her that Siddarth knew far more than he was willing to admit.

The silence between them stretched, thick and oppressive. Riya's heart pounded against her ribs, but she held her ground. Siddarth's warning hung in the air like an unspoken curse, but she had long since passed the point of heeding ominous words.

"I know you're hiding something," she said, her voice measured. "You all are."

Siddarth's fingers twitched at his sides, his posture tense. For a moment, he looked as if he might speak—might unburden himself of some terrible secret. But then, just as quickly, his expression hardened, and he shook his head.

"You don't understand," he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. "There are things buried here that should remain untouched. Let it go, Riya."

He turned sharply and strode away, leaving her alone in the dimly lit temple. A gust of wind rattled the brass bells hanging from the ceiling, sending a chorus of soft chimes through the space. The flames of the oil lamps flickered erratically, casting shifting shadows across the walls.

Riya exhaled slowly, trying to steady her nerves. Whatever Siddarth was afraid of, it was real. Tangible. And it had cost Indranil his life.

Determined, she knelt beside the section of the floor that had caught her attention. The smoothness of the marble was too pristine, too untouched by time. It had been changed recently—covered up. Her fingers ran along the faint seams between the tiles. There had to be a way to lift it.

Glancing over her shoulder to ensure she was alone, she reached for the brass ceremonial bell lying near the altar. With careful precision, she wedged its edge into the thinnest crack she could find. A gentle push. Then another. The marble resisted at first, but then, with a quiet, reluctant groan, it shifted.

Her breath hitched as she peeled the tile away, revealing the darkness beneath.

A hollow space. A compartment. And inside, something wrapped in layers of decayed, crumbling cloth.

Her fingers trembled as she reached in, the fabric disintegrating at her touch. Beneath the remnants of cloth lay a bundle of brittle parchment. The edges were darkened with age, the ink faded but still legible. Symbols. Patterns eerily similar to the ones painted in blood around Indranil's body.

Meanwhile Anirban carried on with his own investigation. Anirban sat on the edge of Indranil's disheveled bed, his fingers brushing over the mahogany desk, now a chaotic mess of crumpled papers, old books, and half-burnt matchsticks. The room smelled of stale incense and something else—something metallic and decayed, a scent that clung to the walls and lingered in the air like an unspoken warning. The flickering candlelight cast restless shadows that stretched and warped across the peeling wallpaper, making the space feel smaller, suffocating, as if the very walls were closing in around him.

He had scoured every inch of the mansion, overturning drawers, peeling back rugs, even checking behind the heavy curtains, looking for anything that might explain Indranil's brutal murder. He had combed through every whisper of a clue, every fragment of a memory, but nothing had made sense. Until now.

As he leaned forward, the weight of exhaustion pressing against his back, something shifted beneath him. A faint, almost imperceptible creak. He froze, his breath catching in his throat. Slowly, he shifted his weight, testing the sound. The noise came again, from beneath the desk.

A loose floorboard.

His pulse quickened. He crouched, fingers tracing along the aged wooden planks until they found the subtle gap. He hesitated. What was he hoping to find? A diary? A letter? Some last piece of Indranil that would explain why he had died so violently?

With a deep breath, he wedged his fingers beneath the board and pried it open. The wood came away with a dull groan, revealing a hidden compartment. Nestled inside, untouched by time, was a thin roll of parchment. It was brittle with age, the edges flaking at the slightest movement.

His heart pounded as he lifted it, hands trembling. He could feel the

weight of its secrecy, the burden of whatever truth it concealed. With deliberate care, he unrolled it, his eyes scanning the faded ink, the intricate, curling lines.

It was a map.

The ink had faded in places, smudged by time and neglect, but the details were unmistakable. A sprawling, intricate blueprint of an old temple sprawled across the parchment, its architecture ancient and foreboding. He traced the lines with his fingers, following the paths and corridors leading to a central chamber. At the bottom of the map, written in ink so dark it seemed fresh, were three words in Bengali, the letters jagged and precise, as though scrawled in urgency:

নিরীশ্বর মন্দির

The Godless Temple.

A shiver ran down Anirban's spine. The name was familiar, but not in the way one remembers a place from childhood. It was something darker—whispers passed down in hushed tones by the elders, stories shared only in the dead of night. The temple was said to be cursed, abandoned long before anyone in the city could remember. A place spoken of in warnings, in half-finished sentences.

His mother had mentioned it once. A fleeting remark, a glimpse of something unsaid before she had quickly changed the subject. He had thought nothing of it then, just another relic of the past. But now, after all these years, its name had resurfaced—tied to Indranil, tied to whatever had led to his death.

Had Indranil uncovered something? Had he ventured too far into secrets that weren't meant to be disturbed? Had it cost him his life?

His grip tightened on the parchment.

The map marked a location at the city's outskirts, buried deep in the forest. An area where the roads faded into tangled undergrowth, where the trees whispered with the voices of the forgotten. A place no one spoke of.

A place no one returned from.

The candle flickered violently, as if disturbed by an unseen breath.

Anirban exhaled slowly. He knew what he had to do.

The path leading to the temple was suffocatingly quiet. The deeper Anirban walked into the forest, the more the trees seemed to close in around him, their gnarled branches twisting overhead like skeletal fingers clawing at the ashen sky. The undergrowth was thick, pressing against his legs like unseen hands, and the air—God, the air—was thick, stagnant, clinging to his skin like something alive.

The sounds of the world had abandoned him. No wind stirred the leaves. No birds called from the canopy. The only sound was his own breathing, ragged and shallow, and the dull crunch of his footsteps on the damp earth.

The unnatural silence gnawed at his nerves. It wasn't just the absence of sound—it was the weight of it, the way it seemed to *listen*.

Then, ahead, the trees thinned, revealing the temple.

A ruin swallowed by time.

It loomed in the clearing like the ribcage of some long-dead beast, its once-grand stone entrance cracked and crumbling. Vines slithered across its surface like veins, their tendrils creeping into the gaps between the stones as if feeding on the decay. Time had tried to erase it, but the temple resisted, standing defiant in its desolation.

And yet, despite the ruin, it did not feel abandoned.

Anirban's breath hitched. His mother had been here. Indranil had been here.

And now, so had he.

A chill slithered down his spine as he approached the entrance. The moment he crossed the threshold, the temperature plummeted. The humid forest air was replaced with something stale, something dead. The scent hit him immediately—damp stone, rotting

vegetation, and something older. A metallic tang. Blood.

The carvings on the walls, though eroded by time, still clung to their haunting expressions. The figures of forgotten deities stared down at him with hollow eyes, their mouths parted as if whispering secrets to the dark. Their faces had been worn away by the years, but it wasn't erosion that unsettled him—it was the distinct sensation that they were watching.

His footsteps echoed as he ventured deeper. The darkness thickened, the flickering beam of his flashlight barely piercing it. The walls, damp and uneven, seemed to breathe, swelling and retracting with the flickering shadows.

His fingers traced the outline of the map in his pocket. The parchment felt unnaturally cold against his skin, as if the ink itself carried some lingering memory of the past.

Then—

A shift.

Not in the air. Not in the darkness.

In the ground.

Anirban froze, his pulse hammering against his ribs. He crouched, running his hands over the smooth marble beneath his feet. Unlike the rest of the worn stone, this section was different—polished, newer. Recently disturbed.

He traced the edges until his fingers found it.

A crevice.

His heart pounded as he wedged his fingers into the crack and pulled.

The stone resisted, groaning in protest, before giving way with a deep, guttural creak. A rush of stale, icy air spilled from below, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of decay.

A staircase.

Narrow. Steep. Swallowed by absolute darkness.

He hesitated, every instinct screaming at him to turn back. But he

had come too far. Indranil had died for whatever was hidden beneath this temple.

Something in the blackness below *wanted* to be found.

The air down there was thicker, heavier. It pressed against his skin, against his lungs, coiling around him like a living thing. The scent of blood was stronger now—pungent and metallic, sharp enough to make his throat tighten.

His flashlight flickered.

Then, just as he placed his foot on the first step, he heard it.

A breath.

Soft. Slow. Right behind him.

He spun, flashlight trembling in his grip. The entrance was empty, the temple behind him silent.

And yet, he swore—*swore*—he was no longer alone.

Something had been standing just behind him. Close enough to touch.

The darkness below yawned wider.

And then, before he could think, before he could convince himself otherwise—

He descended.

The underground chamber stretched endlessly before Anirban, a yawning abyss of stone and shadow. The very air was thick, suffocating, carrying with it a damp, iron-tinged musk that clung to the back of his throat. It was the scent of decay—old, settled, and patient. The darkness here was not ordinary. It was oppressive, alive, curling around him like unseen fingers brushing against his skin.

With a sharp inhale, he struck a match.

The tiny flame bloomed in his trembling fingers, its feeble light barely cutting through the void. Shadows leapt and swayed around him, distorting the uneven stone walls, revealing little more than the vast emptiness pressing in from all sides. The flame flickered violently, struggling against the stagnant air, as though something unseen was trying to snuff it out.

His heart hammered. *Why was it so cold?*

His free hand groped blindly along the rough wall, the stone damp and uneven beneath his fingertips. Then he felt it—something protruding, wooden and splintered. His fingers closed around it. An old torch, still mounted in place.

With cautious, deliberate movements, he brought the match to the brittle wood.

The fire caught.

A bloom of light erupted from the torch, its glow greedy and desperate, licking at the chamber's darkness. Shadows recoiled, retreating to the edges of the room where they seethed, waiting. And as the golden illumination spread, Anirban's breath hitched.

Because he was no longer standing in an empty void.

He was surrounded.

Carvings.

Massive, grotesque depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses covered the walls, their once-sacred forms twisted into something unnatural. The artistry was exquisite—painstakingly detailed, impossibly lifelike—but their expressions… they were *wrong*.

Agonized.

Some bore open mouths, stretched into soundless screams, their stone features frozen in eternal torment. Others had hollow sockets

where their eyes should have been, the empty pits so deep and dark that they seemed to bore straight through the stone itself.

The firelight flickered. And for a fleeting second, the figures seemed to shift, to move, to breathe.

Anirban's grip tightened on the torch.

The walls were **red**.

Not the deep ochre of ancient clay, nor the faded crimson of time-worn paint. No—this was darker. Wetter. A shade that clung to the carvings, dripped into the cracks, pooled in places where the stone had been worn smooth by time and… by something else.

His stomach twisted.

That isn't pigment.

The torchlight deepened the color, turning it slick and fresh, making it seem as though the walls themselves were bleeding, as though something within them had long since seeped into the stone, saturating it beyond redemption.

A terrible pressure settled in his chest.

Slowly, cautiously, he stepped forward.

His foot landed on something uneven.

A platform stood at the center of the chamber, carved from blackened stone. Unlike the rest of the room, it was drenched—a deep, unrelenting red that had seeped into every crevice, staining it beyond time. The surface was uneven, ridged with grooves that seemed designed to let liquid flow, to guide it down the sides and into the floor below.

His fingers tingled with the urge to wipe at it, to test the texture, to know if it was *still wet*.

He swallowed hard.

And then he saw her.

The Crimson Goddess.

Towering above him. Watching. Waiting.

She was unlike any deity he had ever seen.

Her body—red, drenched in it—was carved in horrifying, exquisite detail, her many arms stretching outward in a cruel mockery of divine grace. But it wasn't the beauty of the craftsmanship that sent ice through his veins.

It was what she held.

Her hands bore not weapons, not the usual symbols of power and destruction. Instead, they grasped severed limbs—human arms, legs, some decayed, others disturbingly preserved. Some fingers still curled, as if they had been clutching at life when they were taken.

His breath came sharp and shallow.

And her eyes.

They weren't carved.

They weren't stone.

They were hollow.

Dark, deep, endless sockets stared into him, and for one unbearable moment, Anirban had the horrible, all-consuming certainty that something had once been inside them.

Something had been ripped out.

The torchlight wavered, and his stomach twisted in sheer revulsion as he noticed something else. The goddess was not alone.

Her mount—the beast upon which she sat—was wrong.

Not a lion. Not any earthly animal.

It was half-human, half-something else entirely.

Its elongated limbs bent at unnatural angles, the joints bulging grotesquely beneath the taut stretch of carved flesh. Its mouth was a snarl—too wide, its teeth too jagged, as though someone had tried to carve a scream and had gone too deep, splitting the stone in unnatural ways.

But it was its eyes that undid him.

Because they weren't empty.

They were alive.

Not carved from stone, not painted—real, glistening orbs trapped within the beast's face, wet and watchful, filled with a hunger so ancient, so bottomless, that Anirban's entire body locked into a rigid, suffocating stillness.'

He dared not breathe.

The silence in the chamber pressed against his ears, so heavy it rang like a dull, suffocating hum.

And then, movement.

Not from the carvings.

From the shadows.

A whisper of air. A disturbance just beyond the torch's reach.

A presence.

Something was here.

Something watching.

Then he saw the inscriptions.

Bengali script, carved into the walls in hurried, erratic strokes, as if the writer had been desperate. Terrified. The words blurred, twisting in the dim light, but as his eyes adjusted, the meaning settled into his mind like a heavy weight:

The Goddess demands.
The Crimson One awakens with blood.
Feed her, or be taken.

His stomach lurched.

This place was not abandoned.

This **was still a place of worship.**

And the ritual—it wasn't over.

A breath.

Not his own.

Cold, close, impossibly near.

His grip on the torch tightened until his knuckles ached.

Somewhere in the darkness, something shifted.

A scrape of movement.

The fire shuddered, its glow shrinking for a split second before stabilizing again. And in that moment of flickering uncertainty, Anirban saw it.

A figure.

Tall. Thin. Watching from just beyond the reach of the firelight.

It didn't move. It didn't breathe.

But its head was tilted ever so slightly, as if *listening*.

Meanwhile, the Choudhury Mansion stood like a forgotten relic against the night sky, its once-grand façade now drowning in shadows. The sprawling estate, built on land steeped in generations of wealth and secrecy, had lost both its masters. And with them, its last claim to warmth.

Riya shivered as she stepped onto the marble floors of the long-abandoned hallway, the sound of her footsteps swallowed by the vast emptiness. The chandeliers overhead, covered in dust and cobwebs, dangled like skeletal remains of a forgotten era. The air was thick—musty, stale, yet carrying a faint trace of something else. Something metallic.

She exhaled slowly, steadying her nerves. Midnight had stripped the mansion of any illusion of normalcy. It no longer felt like a house, but a hollowed-out husk—watchful, waiting.

The portraits lining the corridor were the worst.

They stared.

Faded, regal figures of the Choudhury lineage stood frozen in their frames, their expressions unreadable in the dim candlelight she carried. But their eyes—dark, hollow pools—followed her as she moved, as if resentful of her presence. As if they knew she was not supposed to be here.

She swallowed the unease clawing at her throat and pressed forward.

Her goal was clear. Supriya's room.

It was the one place that might hold the truth about what had happened to the Choudhury family. About the rituals. The deaths.

The door to Supriya's room creaked open with an agonizing slowness, revealing a space frozen in time. A dressing table covered in delicate glass perfume bottles. A carved wooden bed, its once-pristine silk sheets now untouched, stiff with dust. The air held a faint trace of sandalwood, a lingering presence of someone long gone.

Riya moved cautiously, letting her fingers trail over the cold wood of the study desk. Nothing seemed out of place—no letters, no journals, no hidden notes.

Until she noticed the wardrobe.

Something about it felt… off.

She approached it slowly, running her hand along the edges. A drawer at the bottom seemed looser than the others.

She knelt, fingers searching—until she felt it.

A seam.

A hidden compartment.

Her pulse quickened. She applied pressure. Click. The wood gave way, revealing a discreet locker, its metallic surface dull under the candlelight. No handle, no combination lock. Just a keyhole.

Damn it.

She had come this far. There had to be a way to open it. The key

had to be somewhere.

She turned, scanning the room. Where would Supriya hide it?

Riya's breath hitched as she scanned the dimly lit room, her candle casting wavering shadows against the walls. If Supriya had hidden something this carefully, it meant one thing—this wasn't just a secret.

It was a warning.

She rose from the floor, her fingers instinctively tightening around the cool brass of the candleholder. The flickering light painted shifting patterns across the wooden surfaces, making the carved bed posts seem like twisted limbs frozen mid-motion.

Where would the key be?

Her eyes drifted toward the dressing table.

Slowly, cautiously, she approached. The mirror above it was cracked—just a hairline fracture running from the top left corner to the center, like lightning caught in glass. The perfume bottles lay undisturbed, their delicate crystal bodies coated in a fine layer of dust. An old comb, strands of long dark hair still entwined in its teeth, sat next to a silver jewelry box.

Riya hesitated before lifting the lid.

Inside, a small assortment of trinkets gleamed in the candlelight—gold bangles, a delicate ruby-studded nose ring, an old pocket watch that had long stopped ticking. But no key.

Her fingers skimmed beneath the velvet lining. Nothing.

She exhaled, frustrated.

The room was too pristine. Too carefully preserved. Almost as if someone—or something—did not want it disturbed.

And yet, the metallic scent in the air persisted. It wasn't overpowering, but it was there, just beneath the mustiness, clinging to the walls.

Blood.

The realization sent a cold shudder racing down her spine.

She turned, her candlelight brushing against the far wall. The wardrobe stood in ominous silence, its hidden compartment mocking her with its locked secret.

Think, Riya. If the locker was this well-concealed, the key wouldn't be left out in the open.

Her gaze swept the room once more—pausing at the bed.

No.

A lump formed in her throat.

Crouching, she hesitated before reaching beneath the heavy wooden frame. The underside was coated in dust, the fabric of the hanging sheets brittle to the touch. Her fingers searched blindly through the darkness, brushing against the cool, unyielding surface of the floor —

She felt it in the way the air thickened, how every creak of the wooden floor beneath her seemed amplified, ringing through the empty corridors like a whispered warning.

And then—

A sound behind her.

Soft. Deliberate.

A breath she did not take.

Riya whirled around, her heart hammering against her ribs.

Siddharth.

He stood at the threshold of the room, half-hidden in the shadows. His features were cast in flickering light, his face devoid of any readable expression. There was something unsettling about him—like he belonged to the darkness, like he had always been there, waiting.

Silent. Watching.

He lifted his hand. The candlelight caught a glint of metal. A key, held loosely between his fingers.

Riya's throat tightened.

“How—”

He said nothing. No explanation. No command. Just that same unreadable gaze that sent a shiver crawling down her spine. Then, without another word, he turned and walked away, his figure vanishing into the corridor’s gloom as if he had never been there at all.

The silence that followed was heavier than before.

Riya exhaled sharply, steadying herself. Her fingers closed around the key, its metal oddly warm against her palm. She turned back to the locker.

The key slid in smoothly.

Click.

The door creaked open, its hinges letting out a groan that made the candlelight tremble.

And Riya froze.

Riya hesitated, fingers hovering over the stack of aged parchment inside the hidden compartment. The papers looked ancient, their edges curled and brittle, stained with time—or perhaps something worse. The candle’s weak flame flickered, casting elongated shadows over the inked pages.

A chill crawled up her spine.

She hadn’t even touched them yet, and still, a part of her screamed don’t.

The candlelight shuddered.

The air thickened. Heavy. Clotted.

As Riya unfolded the last sheet, something in the very walls of the mansion seemed to stir. A presence—not seen, not heard, but felt.

Her fingers trembled over the paper.

The offering must be made on the 10th night.

Vijayadashami. The final day of Durga Puja.

But this was no celebration. No triumph of good over evil.

This was something older. Hungrier.

She forced herself to keep reading.

The Goddess does not leave. The Goddess does not forgive.

The words coiled around her like fingers pressing against her throat.

The next page held a diagram. Hand-drawn, crude, almost frantic. It depicted a temple—ancient, crumbling, swallowed by the forest. A structure left to rot, forgotten by time, yet still waiting.

At its center stood a figure.

A woman.

Her arms stretched unnaturally wide, her body bent backward in a pose of grotesque submission. Her mouth open—silent, screaming.

The inked lines of her hair bled into something else. Something not hair at all.

Tendrils.

Rakta Chhaya.

The Shadow of Blood.

The place where no one went. Where even sunlight felt wrong.

She turned the page. And the ritual unfolded before her.

The calling.

The chosen woman was taken, brought to the temple under the guise of devotion. She was bathed in sacred oils, adorned in crimson—red bangles, red sindoor, a red sari. A bride to something that had never been human.

The priest who carried the burden of the ritual. They cleansed themselves, whispering prayers at the temple threshold, leaving offerings of blood—small at first. Animals. Birds. Warm bodies writhing, throats split, their crimson lifeblood seeping into the stone.

The chosen woman was stripped of her name.

She was no longer who she had been. She belonged to the Goddess now.

She was taken deeper into the temple. Down stone steps slick with centuries of old sacrifices, into the cavernous hollow beneath the earth. The sanctum.

The final night—the 10th night—was the Offering.

The woman, drugged into compliance, was led before the idol. Not the goddess the world worshipped, not Durga.

The Crimson Goddess.

Her idol was not golden, not benevolent.

It was stone, blackened with soot, streaked with ancient, congealed blood.

Her form was grotesque. Twisted.

A deity with too many arms, stretching in unnatural directions. Her face—human, yet wrong. Where eyes should have been, there were only hollow voids. Her mouth stretched in an eternal grin, but her teeth—jagged, uneven, too many.

The idol did not sit on a lotus.

She sat on bones.

And her hands were always outstretched. Waiting.

For the sacrifice.

The chosen woman was made to kneel before her, head bowed, wrists bound.

The priests gathered around, their voices rising in fevered chants, hands grasping ritual blades, smeared in ash and vermillion.

The moment the blade touched her throat, the temple breathed.

The walls exhaled.

And the idol's mouth… moved.

The pages blurred before Riya's eyes, the candlelight twisting. The words shifted on the paper, pulsing as if alive.

She forced herself to keep reading.

The blood must not be wasted.

It was collected in a deep earthen vessel, thick and steaming. The head of the offering was placed at the idol's feet. The rest of the body—consumed.

Not by fire.

By the earth itself.

The stone beneath the altar split, cracked open like a mouth, swallowing flesh, bone, sinew.

The offering was not for the Goddess.

It was to keep her asleep.

A lock. A seal. A price paid every 25 years so that the Crimson Goddess would not rise, would not walk again.

And if the ritual was ever broken—

The last lines of the document sent ice down Riya's spine.

"If She wakes, the blood of the town will take her place."

Her breath came in short, shallow bursts.

The candle flickered wildly.

Behind her, the wooden floor creaked.

She wasn't alone.

A shadow loomed.

And then—

A voice.

Low. Unreadable.

"Riya…..?"

Her stomach dropped.

She turned, hands clutching the parchment like a lifeline.

Anirban stood in the doorway, his face shrouded in darkness.

His expression unreadable.

The candlelight guttered between them, its frail glow barely holding back the suffocating dark.

Chapter 7: The Keeper of Blood

Anirban stood in the doorway, his face obscured by the shadows. His silhouette was rigid, unmoving, but the moment she met his eyes, her breath caught in her throat.

Something was wrong.

He looked… hollow. A ghost of the man she had seen only hours ago. His eyes, usually sharp and restless, were bloodshot, rimmed with something dangerously close to devastation. His fists were clenched so tightly at his sides that she could see the tension rippling through his arms.

“Anirban?” she asked cautiously, her voice barely above a whisper.

His gaze flickered to the parchment in her hands. He stepped forward, his movements eerily slow, the wooden floorboards creaking beneath his weight.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was quiet. But it carried the weight of something unbearable.

“It was her.”

Riya frowned. “What do you mean?”

He inhaled sharply, as if saying the words aloud would shatter him completely. His lips parted, then pressed into a thin line.

Then, finally, he forced them out.

“The last sacrifice… twenty-five years ago. It was my mother.”

The parchment slipped from her fingers.

For a moment, Riya forgot how to breathe.

She stared at him, her mind refusing to process what she had just heard. The words echoed in the hollow space between them, and yet they felt so distant, so surreal, as if spoken from another world.

“No…” The word barely left her lips.

Anirban let out a dry, bitter laugh, one that held no humor, only pain. “I grew up believing it was an accident. That she died like anyone else. That it was fate, or some cruel twist of chance.” His hands trembled at his sides. “But it was them, Riya. They took her.”

His voice cracked on the last word, and Riya felt something inside her tighten painfully.

Anirban had always been strong—perhaps too strong. He had carried himself with the weight of a man who refused to break, who refused to let the world see his weaknesses. But tonight, as he stood before her, the truth unraveling in his hands, she saw him for what he really was.

A son who had been lied to his entire life. A boy who had grown up in the shadow of a mother’s absence, never knowing the horror behind it.

She took a step forward, but he pulled away, shaking his head. His breathing had turned ragged, his body shaking under the weight of emotions he couldn’t contain anymore.

“All this time,” he muttered, raking his fingers through his hair. “All this time, I was chasing ghosts. I thought I was just uncovering a story, a crime, a murderer lurking in the shadows. But I was wrong.” His voice was growing unsteady, frantic. “This isn’t just about Supriya or Indranil anymore. It’s about her. My mother. The life they stole from me.”

His shoulders trembled.

Riya’s heart clenched.

She couldn't stand seeing him like this.

“Anirban,” she said softly, stepping closer again. “Look at me.”

He didn’t. He turned away, his hands gripping the edge of the desk as if he needed to hold onto something solid before he collapsed. His whole body radiated fury and grief, emotions warring inside him with such intensity that it was painful to witness.

Riya swallowed back the lump in her throat.

And then, without another thought, she closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him.

Anirban tensed. His whole body went rigid at the sudden contact.

For a moment, he didn’t move.

Then, all at once, the dam broke.

His arms clutched at her, fingers digging into the fabric of her shirt as if anchoring himself to something real. His breath came in sharp, uneven gasps against her shoulder. She felt his hands tremble against her back.

Riya held him tighter.

“It's okay,” she murmured. “I'm here.”

He let out a strangled breath, something between a sigh and a sob.

“I swear, Anirban,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “We will find out who did this. We will make them pay.”

He let out a bitter, broken laugh. “What if I already know? What if it was all of them? The ones who kept this secret for years? The people who watched my mother die and said nothing?” His voice cracked again. “I—I don’t even know who I am anymore, Riya.”

She pulled back just enough to cup his face between her hands, forcing him to meet her eyes.

“Listen to me,” she said fiercely. “You are not them, Anirban. You are not bound by their actions. You are your own person. And you will end this.”

His eyes, red and hollow, searched hers, desperate for something to hold onto.

She didn't look away.

After what felt like an eternity, his breathing slowed. His fingers, still trembling, loosened their grip, resting lightly on her wrists.

A long silence passed.

Then, finally, he nodded.

Riya held onto Anirban tightly, her arms wrapped around him with a quiet desperation. She could feel his body trembling—whether from grief, rage, or exhaustion, she didn't know. His fingers clutched at the fabric of her shirt as if letting go would mean collapsing completely.

For a long moment, he remained rigid, his breathing uneven against her shoulder. Then, slowly, he gave in. His arms tightened around her, his grip almost bruising, as though he were afraid she, too, would slip away like everything else in his life.

"I'm here," Riya whispered. "You're not alone in this."

A sharp breath escaped him, somewhere between a sob and a laugh. "I don't know how to do this, Riya. I don't know how to carry this."

"You don't have to. We will carry it together."

Anirban exhaled shakily, but he didn't let go. For the first time in a long while, he allowed himself to lean on someone else.

They stayed like that, wrapped in silence, until Anirban finally stepped back, his eyes red-rimmed, his face drawn. But there was something else beneath the grief now—a fire rekindled, a desperation that went beyond sorrow.

"We don't have time to grieve," he murmured, wiping a hand over his face. "I need to know why. Why her? Why all of them?" His voice hardened. "And I need to find out who did this."

Riya nodded, though worry still clouded her eyes. "We will."

The next two days passed in a haze of unanswered questions.

Durga Puja continued in full force outside, the city alive with devotion and celebration, but inside Anirban's mind, everything was unraveling. The streets thrummed with the sound of dhak drums, conch shells blowing in the distance, voices raised in joyous chants, yet none of it reached him. It all felt like a cruel

contradiction—life blooming around him while his own reality decayed from within.

He barely slept. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the documents, the inked words that named his mother as the last sacrifice. The truth clawed at his sanity like a parasite, burrowing deep, refusing to let go. His mind replayed the discovery over and over, as if trying to force itself to accept it. His mother—Leela Basu—wasn't the victim of some tragic accident. She wasn't taken by fate's cruel hand. She had been sacrificed. Murdered in the name of something ancient and monstrous. And no one had ever told him.

He paced the length of his room, the old wooden floor creaking beneath his restless steps. His fingers trembled as he held the parchment once more, the edges crumpled from how many times he had gripped it in anger and disbelief. He ran his eyes over the words, even though they were already burned into his memory.

The last offering: Leela Basu.

A rush of nausea twisted his stomach. His mother's name, written in a ledger of death. A name that should have been carved onto an award, a byline beneath powerful headlines—**Leela Basu, Investigative Journalist**—not scribbled in a hidden record of human sacrifice.

His breath hitched, his chest tightening painfully. The rage was there, simmering beneath the grief, waiting to explode. But more than that, there was an unbearable sense of betrayal.

How many people had known?

How many had whispered about it behind closed doors, sworn to silence?

Had his father known? Had his family kept this from him all these

years?

Anirban's hands clenched into fists at the thought. He had spent his entire life believing a lie. Every moment of grief he had endured as a child, every night spent longing for a mother who never returned —he had mourned under false pretenses. They had let him cry over an "accident," had let him grow up in ignorance, when all along, her death had been a ritual. A deliberate act.

His vision blurred, his throat constricting. The air in the room felt suffocating, thick with dust and old secrets. He pushed open the window, gasping in the cool night air. The distant glow of pandals bathed the city in golden light, making everything look almost surreal. The world was celebrating, wrapped in festivity and devotion. And yet, somewhere beneath the surface, something dark lurked. A ritual older than him. A cycle of death that had claimed his mother and now threatened to repeat itself.

He gritted his teeth.

No more.

If there was one thing he had inherited from Leela Basu, it was the relentless need for truth. He would not be a passive spectator in his own history. He would rip apart every lie, uncover every hidden truth, no matter how deep he had to dig.

Meanwhile, Riya had her own battle to fight. Siddharth had locked himself in his room, refusing to speak. She had knocked at first—gently, patiently.

"Siddharth?" she called. "We need to talk."

No response.

She knocked again, harder this time. "I know you're in there."

Still nothing. She could hear his footsteps pacing inside, the occasional scrape of a chair, but he didn't answer. He had shut the world out, burying himself in silence. Riya wasn't having it.

"I'm not going away," she warned. "So either you open this door, or I start kicking it down."

She waited. A full minute passed.

Then two.

She sighed, pressing her forehead against the wood. “Please,” she tried again, her voice softer. “I know you’re hurting. We all are. But locking yourself in here won’t change what happened to Supriya.”

Nothing.

Riya clenched her fists, frustration burning in her chest. “You think you’re the only one who lost someone?” she snapped. “We all lost her, Siddharth! And now Indranil is gone too!”

Still, the silence held.

Riya closed her eyes, inhaling deeply through her nose. She had to make him talk. She had to break through whatever wall he had built around himself.

And then, she thought of something. The one thing she knew he wouldn’t be able to ignore.

Her voice dropped, trembling with barely contained fury. “You owe this to Supriya,” she said. “She trusted you. And now she’s dead. You think staying quiet will bring her back?”

Silence.

For a moment, she thought he would ignore her again, retreat into whatever grief-ridden shell he had built.

Then, through the crack beneath the door, she saw his shadow shift. A moment later, something heavy clattered—a book, maybe, thrown onto the floor. The lock clicked, and the door creaked open just enough for her to slip inside. The room was dark. The curtains were drawn, shutting out the world, and the only light came from the dim glow of his laptop screen. Books, papers, and half-empty cups of coffee littered the desk, but it was Siddharth himself who looked the worst.

He was slumped in his chair, his hair unkempt, dark circles bruising his skin. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

He didn’t meet her eyes.

Riya hesitated before sitting on the edge of his desk. “Siddharth,” she said, her voice gentler now. “Talk to me.”

He exhaled shakily, running a hand over his face. “There’s nothing to say,” he muttered.

“You and I both know that’s not true,” she shot back.

He let out a humorless laugh. “What do you want me to say, Riya? That I should’ve done more? That I should’ve figured it out earlier?” He leaned forward, gripping the desk so tightly his knuckles turned white. “She called me the night before she died, you know. Said she was close to something. That she finally understood why the sacrifices happen. But I didn’t press her for details. I thought—I thought I’d have time to ask her later.”

His voice cracked on the last word.

Riya felt a lump rise in her throat, but she forced herself to stay steady. “And now you do have time,” she said quietly. “For her sake. For Indranil’s.”

Siddharth swallowed hard but didn’t reply.

Riya leaned closer. “You know something, don’t you?”

Still, he didn’t speak.

She reached forward and covered his clenched fist with her own. “Supriya was trying to stop this. She knew who was behind it, or at least she was close. But now she’s gone, and Indranil is gone, and we’re running out of time.”

Siddharth’s eyes flickered. “Time for what?”

Riya’s stomach twisted. “For the next sacrifice.”

A heavy silence settled between them.

And then, finally, Siddharth exhaled. The words spilled from his lips in a broken whisper.

“The Choudhury family,” he murmured. “They’re connected to this. I don’t know how deep it runs, but I know Supriya and Indranil had figured something out. They knew it was that year again.”

Riya tensed. She had read about the sacrifices in the old records. Every twenty-five years, a life was taken. But hearing it aloud—knowing that Supriya had died because she got too close—made it

feel more real.

“The year of the sacrifice,” Siddharth continued, voice hollow. “Every twenty-five years, someone disappears. And this year… it was supposed to happen again.”

A chill ran down Riya’s spine. “You mean… this has been happening for centuries?”

Siddharth nodded. “The first recorded case was in 1825. Then 1850. Then 1875. Every twenty-five years, like clockwork.”

She swallowed hard. “And 1999?”

His jaw tensed. “Leela Basu.”

Anirban’s mother.

Siddharth’s voice turned rough. “Ma (Supriya) figured it out before anyone else. She was going to meet someone—an old priest in Kalighat. He was the only one willing to talk. She thought he could help.”

“But she was murdered before she could reach him,” Riya whispered.

Siddharth’s expression darkened. “She told me she was close to something. She said, *I know why they do it, Siddharth. It’s not just blind tradition. It’s something worse.* But she never got the chance to explain.”

Riya’s grip on his hand tightened. “Then we’ll find out for her.”

Siddharth looked at her, searching her face for something. And then, slowly, he nodded. Then he let out a shuddering breath, his fingers still clenched around the desk's edge. His voice was hoarse, weighed down by exhaustion and regret.

“Papa knew about the priest too,” he said. “That’s why he tried to meet him. The first time he went, Anirban followed him, so he couldn’t risk it. The second time…” He swallowed hard. “He never came back.”

Riya shook her head, trying to piece it all together. Indranil must have uncovered something before his death. Something that made him seek out the priest. And now, here they were—following the same breadcrumbs.

She stood up. “Thank you for telling me everything, Siddharth.”

He gave her a weary look, like he wasn’t sure whether what he had just done was a mistake. “Be careful, Riya. This… this isn’t just old legends and rituals. People die for this.”

She met his eyes. “I know. But people have already died. Supriya. Your father. And if we don’t do something now, it’ll happen again.”

Siddharth didn’t argue. He only exhaled sharply and turned away as if unable to face the truth any longer.

Riya left his house and headed straight for Anirban.

The tea stall was nearly empty at this hour, save for the old man behind the counter who busied himself wiping down chipped glasses, and a few lone stragglers nursing their cups of steaming chai. The river beyond stretched into the darkness, its waters black and endless, reflecting the occasional shimmer of distant lights.

Anirban sat at the far end of the stall, just beyond the reach of the flickering bulb that swung lazily from the wooden roof. His head was bowed, his fingers tracing circles around the rim of a small, empty clay cup. The tea inside had long gone cold, but he hadn’t noticed—or perhaps he had and simply didn’t care. His shoulders were hunched, his face shadowed, unreadable.

Riya spotted him immediately. She didn’t hesitate as she crossed the uneven ground, weaving past a stray dog curled up near the counter, and slid onto the bench beside him.

Anirban didn’t look up.

She didn’t waste time with greetings. “I spoke to Siddharth.”

That got his attention. His fingers stilled against the cup, and after a long pause, he finally turned his head to look at her. His dark eyes flickered with something she couldn’t quite place—wariness, curiosity, maybe even exhaustion.

“And?” he said, his voice quiet but sharp.

Riya took a breath, steadying herself. “He told me about your father. And about the priest in Kalighat.”

Anirban’s grip on the cup tightened, his knuckles turning white. The night air carried the scent of damp earth and burning incense from a temple nearby, but at this moment, all she could focus on was his expression—how his jaw clenched, how something in his eyes hardened.

“So you know,” he murmured, his voice carefully neutral.

Riya leaned forward, resting her elbows on the rough wooden table. “We need to go see him.”

Anirban let out a hollow laugh and shook his head, setting the cup down with a dull thud. “You think some old man in Kalighat has all the answers?” His tone was almost mocking, but there was something else beneath it. Something frayed at the edges.

“I think he’s the only lead we have left,” she countered. “Whatever this priest knows, it's enough for people to die over.”

Anirban exhaled sharply, running a hand down his face. “And what if we don’t like what we find?”

Riya’s throat tightened. “Then at least we’ll know the truth.”

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the distant clang of a temple bell and the rhythmic slosh of water against the ghats. The night felt heavy, as if the air itself was thick with something unseen, something watching.

For a moment, Anirban didn’t move. His fingers hovered over the table, his mind clearly at war with itself. Then, finally, he pushed the cup away and stood up.

“Fine,” he said, his voice quieter now. “Let’s go.”

Without another word, they left the tea stall, disappearing into the narrow, winding alleys that would take them to Kalighat—toward whatever truth waited in the shadows.

The **Kalighat temple** loomed before them, an

ancient guardian of secrets too dark to be spoken aloud. Even at this hour, the temple grounds pulsed with life—devotees whispering hurried prayers, the scent of burning incense thick in the air, bells tolling through the night like warnings from another realm. The stone steps leading inside were slick from the evening's rain, glistening under the dim glow of scattered oil lamps.

But **Riya and Anirban** weren't here for the temple's gods.

They moved through the winding corridors, past the towering idol of the goddess, past the flickering flames of countless candles that cast their shadows into something almost alive. Every step deeper into the sanctum felt like stepping away from the world they knew.

And then they found him.

The priest sat hunched over inside a **cramped, candlelit chamber**, a place that smelled of damp earth, burning ghee, and something else—something old, something heavy with time. The room was suffocatingly small, lined with shelves of faded prayer scrolls and blackened brass idols. A brass lamp flickered between them, its golden light illuminating the deep hollows of the priest's face.

The priest was unlike any holy man Anirban or Riya had ever seen.

He sat hunched on the stone floor, gaunt and skeletal, his skin

stretched so tightly over his bones that he looked more like a relic than a living man. Deep-set eyes, black and sunken like pits, gleamed in the dim candlelight, watching them without blinking. His face was hollow, his cheekbones jutting out sharply, as if he had long since abandoned the need for earthly sustenance. His lips were cracked and dry, but when he spoke, his voice carried a weight that sent a shiver through the room.

But what truly unsettled them was the crimson hue that covered him from head to toe.

His bare arms and chest were smeared with deep red, the dried, flaking residue of some past ritual, creating eerie patterns across his frail body. It wasn't just paint—it looked like dried blood, aged and darkened, soaking into the wrinkles of his weathered skin. The color spread across his bony fingers, seeping beneath his jagged, overgrown nails.

His robes, once perhaps sacred and pure, were now a deep red, almost black at the edges, hanging loosely from his frail frame. The fabric was worn thin, stained with layers of old sacrifices, as if it had absorbed the suffering of those who had stood before him. The robes draped around him like funeral shrouds, their tattered ends pooling onto the stone floor, a river of blood in fabric form.

His breathing was slow, deliberate, and yet, despite his frailty, there was something predatory about him—something that made the air feel thick with unseen forces. The candlelight flickered against his form, making the crimson on his body seem to shimmer and shift, as though it were alive.

And when he finally smiled, it was worse than if he had screamed.

His lips curled back just enough to reveal teeth too white, too perfect, in stark contrast to his decaying frame. It was the kind of smile that did not belong on a human face—one that spoke of secrets too dark to be spoken, of rituals performed in shadows, of knowledge that could rot the soul.

"You have come late," he rasped, the flickering light making his bloodstained visage look almost demonic. "Too late, perhaps."

And he was watching them. As if he had been expecting them.

Anirban took a step forward, his hands clenching at his sides. “You knew Indranil.”

The priest did not respond immediately. His gaze traveled slowly across Anirban’s face, then shifted to Riya. There was something unsettling in the way he studied them, as if measuring their worth.

Then he finally spoke.

“I knew many,” he said, his voice low, deliberate. “Indranil was one of them. But he was not the first.”

Anirban frowned. “Then who was?”

The priest exhaled slowly. “Leela Basu.”

Anirban froze.

Riya felt the air shift, felt the tension in Anirban’s stance, the sharp inhale he took as if the name had been a knife pressed against his throat.

“My mother?” His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper. “What do you mean?”

The priest’s gaze did not waver. “She came to me twenty-five years ago. Just as you have now.”

Anirban took a step back, shaking his head. “No… that’s not possible. She never—” He stopped abruptly, as if realizing that he had no way of proving it wrong. His breathing turned uneven, his fists clenched at his sides. “You’re lying.”

“I do not lie about the dead,” the priest murmured. “Your mother came seeking answers. Just like you. Just like Indranil.” His voice darkened. “And just like Indranil, she came too close to the truth.”

Riya placed a hand on Anirban’s arm, feeling the way his muscles tensed beneath her touch. “What truth?” she asked.

The priest sighed, his fingers ghosting over the beads of a prayer mala in his lap. “The truth of the pact.” His gaze flickered like the candle’s flame. “The curse that demands blood every twenty-five years. It is not just a ritual—it is a contract. And as long as the one who carries the pact’s burden lives, it will never end.”

Anirban swallowed hard, his mind reeling. “Are you saying that someone is keeping this going on purpose?”

The priest nodded. “It is a curse that runs through generations. Passed from one keeper to the next. And the only way to break it is to kill the one who keeps it alive.”

Silence.

Riya felt the weight of the air pressing down on them, thick with something unspoken. The walls of the chamber seemed to close in, the flickering flames stretching their shadows into something monstrous.

“Who?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Who is responsible for this?”

The priest smiled then, a slow, grim twist of his lips. “That, child, is for you to uncover. But I will tell you this—your mother was close. Too close. And so was Indranil.” He paused, his gaze locking onto Anirban’s. “That is why they had to die.”

Anirban stiffened, his breathing unsteady. “Tell me the name,” he demanded, his voice shaking with rage.

The priest only shook his head. “I have already told you more than I should. The rest… is up to you.”

A sudden gust of wind rushed through the chamber, making the candle flicker wildly. The shadows on the walls twisted like writhing figures, their elongated forms stretching and bending unnaturally. The temperature seemed to drop, a chilling finality settling over them.

And in that moment, Riya understood.

This wasn’t just about stopping a ritual.

This wasn’t just about uncovering a forgotten past.

This was about hunting down a murderer.

As they stepped out of the temple’s sanctum, the weight of the priest’s words pressed down on them like a curse of its own. The air outside felt thick, humid, and yet somehow colder than before, as if the temple had exhaled its secrets into the night. The scent of

burning incense mixed with the distant stink of the Hooghly River, the world outside still moving while theirs had just been turned upside down.

Anirban walked ahead, his hands clenched into fists, his posture stiff with tension. Riya followed, the rhythmic clang of temple bells filling the silence between them. The moment they reached the outer courtyard, she finally reached out, grabbing his arm and forcing him to stop.

“Anirban.” Her voice was softer than before, a contrast to the relentless way she had been pushing him for answers all night. “Talk to me.”

He let out a hollow laugh, shaking his head but not looking at her. “Talk to you? What is there left to say, Riya?” His voice was raw. “That everything I thought I knew about my family is a lie? That my mother—my own mother—was hiding this from me?”

Riya swallowed, choosing her words carefully. “Maybe she was trying to protect you.”

Anirban finally turned to face her, his dark eyes burning with frustration. “Protect me? By keeping me in the dark? By letting me believe my father was just another victim?” His voice wavered, and he took a shaky breath. “She met that priest twenty-five years ago, Riya. That means she knew something all along. She knew about the curse, about the sacrifices, and she never told me. Why?”

Riya didn’t have an answer for him. She didn’t know what it was like to have so many years of family history crumble around her in a single night. Instead, she placed a hand on his shoulder, grounding him. “Maybe she was scared. Maybe she thought knowing would put you in danger.”

Anirban exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. “Maybe. Or maybe she knew I’d end up here eventually. That no matter what she did, I’d find my way back to this nightmare.” He turned his gaze back toward the temple, his expression unreadable. “She must have realized she wouldn’t be able to stop it. Neither could my father. They both tried, and they both died.”

Riya’s grip on his shoulder tightened. “Then we need to finish what they started.”

A flicker of something passed through his eyes—pain, determination, maybe both. He gave a short nod, then turned away, staring down the narrow stone steps leading away from the temple.

A heavy silence settled between them. Anirban stared at the ground for a moment before shaking his head. “I need to talk to someone.”

Riya frowned. “Who?”

He looked up at her. “Mohan Da.”

Riya blinked. “Mohan Da?”

“He’s the only one I can think of who might help us make sense of this,” Anirban said firmly. “He’s spent his whole life studying rituals, folklore, everything that ties history to the present. If anyone can help me understand what my mother was after, it’s him.”

Riya hesitated. “Are you sure he even knows anything about this?”

“He might not,” Anirban admitted. “But I trust him. And I haven’t seen him in days.” His voice softened for a moment. “I should have gone sooner.”

Riya sighed. She respected Mohan Da as much as anyone else did. He was one of those rare people whose presence alone carried wisdom, someone who had spent a lifetime gathering knowledge most people overlooked. If Anirban thought he could help, then maybe he could.

Still, something about all this unsettled her.

“We should be careful,” she said after a moment. “If this ritual is still alive, if people have died to keep it going, then we need to make sure we aren’t walking straight into something we don’t understand.”

Anirban nodded. “That’s why I need answers. And Mohan Da is the only one I trust to give them to me.”

He didn’t wait for her response. He turned and started walking.

Riya took a deep breath, pushing down the unease creeping at the edges of her mind, before following him into the night.

It was the ninth night of the puja.

Kolkata was alive—a city burning with devotion. The streets pulsed with the thunderous beat of the dhak, their deep, rhythmic echoes reverberating through the narrow alleyways like the heartbeat of an ancient beast. Smoke curled into the sky, thick with the scent of incense, camphor, and burning ghee. Marigolds draped every corner, their golden petals catching the flickering flames of oil lamps, illuminating thousands of ecstatic faces that swayed in unison, their voices raised in fevered chants.

But here, in a forgotten lane of North Kolkata, the chaos of celebration faded into nothingness.

Here, the air was dead.

Here, silence ruled.

Mohan Da's house stood at the very edge of this silence—a relic of the past, tucked away like an ugly secret no one dared to unearth.

Anirban and Riya stepped carefully through the crumbling alleyway, the weight of an unseen presence pressing against them like a held breath. The air was damp, thick with something old and rotting. The house loomed ahead, its weathered red bricks stained with time, its wooden doors swollen with decay. Blackened vines crawled up its walls like gnarled fingers, suffocating whatever life had once lingered within.

Above the main doorway, a symbol was carved into the wood.

Neither of them recognized it.

And yet, it felt disturbingly familiar.

Anirban hesitated, his fingers tightening into a fist.

Then, he knocked.

The sound shattered the silence, echoing into the hollow belly of the house.

No answer.

Riya shifted uneasily. "He's not home."

"Then we wait," Anirban said, his voice quieter now, almost

hesitant.

The iron gate groaned, its rusted hinges screaming as they pushed it open. The moment they stepped inside, the air changed.

It was thicker.

Heavier.

Like the house itself was breathing.

The scent of damp earth and old clay clung to them, but beneath it lurked something sharp, metallic.

Blood?

Anirban dismissed the thought.

But his stomach churned.

The main hall was a graveyard of unfinished figures.

Clay idols stood frozen in half-formed agony—some missing limbs, others leaning against the walls, their carved bodies covered in crimson markings that looked… fresh. Too fresh.

Shattered wooden frames littered the floor, remnants of long-forgotten deities now lost to dust. Once-gilded sculptures lay in pieces, their splintered edges dull in the dim light.

And the eyes—those hollow, sculpted eyes.

They were the worst.

Anirban had been here before. Many times.

But tonight…

Tonight, the idols felt different.

They watched him.

He could feel it. The weight of their stares pressing into his skin like a cold hand on his shoulder.

Anirban exhaled slowly. His mind was playing tricks on him. It had to be.

Riya took a step back, her breath unsteady. “This place is… wrong.”

“I know,” Anirban admitted.

She sighed, glancing around. “I need to find a washroom.”

He barely responded as she disappeared into the dim corridor.

The silence deepened.

The idols stood around him, frozen in their incomplete forms. And yet… the longer he stared, the more wrong they seemed.

One of them was missing an arm.

Another had a cracked face, its lower half crumbling into dust.

And yet…

The eyes.

Something crawled over Anirban’s spine.

He turned away.

The feeling didn’t leave him.

They were moving.

Not while he was looking.

But the moment he turned his back, they shifted.

He knew it.

The air pressed against his skin, thick with something unseen. The scent of burning incense tightened around his throat.

Then—

A sound.

Faint.

Distant.

“Anirban.”

His breath hitched.

Riya’s voice.

But it sounded wrong.

Soft. Twisted.

Like something was wearing her voice like a mask.

He turned sharply. “Riya?”

No answer.

The hallway stretched before him, dark and endless, the walls lined with more unblinking idols. Somewhere in the distance, a single candle flickered, its glow barely pushing back the shadows.

Something about the air had changed.

The house felt smaller.

Like the walls were closing in.

He stepped forward.

His pulse thundered in his ears.

Then he saw it.

The room was wrong. A massive drawing dominated the wall. A mural—no, a shrine—etched in deep crimson. It was her. The Crimson Goddess.

Her figure loomed across the cracked plaster, her scarlet-rimmed eyes staring into the void with a knowing hunger. The red pigment bled into the wall’s crevices, as if the very foundation of the house had been fed with sacrifice. And below her, a table.

Incense burned in perfectly aligned rows, their smoke curling upwards in ghostly spirals. And in front of it, Riya stood.

Unmoving.

Her fingers hovered over an ancient scripture, its pages brittle with time, its ink somehow fresh despite its age. Anirban took a breath.

His voice felt distant, detached.

“What is that?”

Riya didn’t answer.

She picked it up.

The moment her fingers touched the parchment, the air shifted.

The candle behind her flickered violently, its flame twisting in an unnatural arc.

And then, as Anirban stepped closer, he saw the words.

He read them. And the blood in his veins turned to ice.

Desperation and Despair

Centuries ago, before the grand mansions and golden idols, before the Choudhurys rose to power, before the city of Kolkata became what it is today, there was only ruin.

A man, desperate and broken, wandered through the dense, suffocating mangroves at the edge of an unnamed village. His people were starving. His lands had turned to dust. His gods had abandoned him.

The night of Maha Ashtami hung thick with storm clouds. The wind howled through the trees, whispering, shrieking—as if the very air was alive with unseen things. His prayers had gone unanswered for too long, but still, he begged. He bled at the feet of the stone idols. He fasted until his ribs clawed through his skin. He burnt offerings until the very air reeked of desperation.

But the heavens remained silent.

And then, when all hope had withered… she came.

First, a whisper, barely audible beneath the rustling leaves. Then a voice, rich and layered, crawling into his bones. A presence loomed behind him, thick with the scent of iron and incense.

And when he turned, he saw her.

She was not of this world.

Her eyes were black pits, rimmed with burning crimson. Her lips were slick with blood. Her skin, deep as the night, shimmered like molten obsidian beneath the storm-light. Her four hands—raised in both blessing and command—were streaked with the remains of those who had come before.

She did not ask for devotion. She did not demand faith.

She only required blood.

The Bargain

It was not the Choudhurys who first knelt before her. Their hands had never tilled the soil, nor had their stomachs ever known true hunger. It was the nameless ancestors of Mohan Da—the forgotten ones, the forsaken ones—who had crafted the pact in the shadows of history.

For power. For survival.

The Crimson Goddess listened when the heavens turned deaf. She listened when the temples shut their doors. She listened when the world refused to grant mercy.

She whispered secrets of wealth and dominion. She promised lands that would never wither, crops that would never fail, a lineage that would never fade into dust.

But no gift from the divine comes without a price.

She did not ask for mere prayers or empty rituals. She did not care for incense or flowers.

She wanted blood.

And not just any blood.

A sacrifice—one given freely, in devotion, in surrender. A woman, taken at the peak of Durga Puja. A soul tethered to the Goddess, bled in her name, offered at the exact moment when the veil between worlds was weakest.

And in return, the Choudhurys—the patrons, the financiers, the ones who whispered into the ears of kings—would thrive.

Their wealth would multiply. Their influence would stretch far beyond Bengal. Their name would become legend.

And so, the pact was forged.

The Price

Every twenty-five years, a debt had to be paid.

The Choudhurys, with their silk-draped wives and gold-laden halls, never dirtied their hands with the rituals. That was left to the unseen ones—the priests, the enforcers, the keepers of the pact. Mohan Da's ancestors.

They were the ones who carried out the sacrifice.

They were the ones who ensured that when the city roared with devotion, when the final prayers of Durga Puja rose into the heavens, the Goddess was fed.

But the blood never washed away.

And the burden of the pact did not pass without consequence.

The keepers of the ritual—those who called upon the Goddess, those who bled in her name—began to see things.

Visions of the past sacrifices. Women, shrouded in crimson, their mouths open in silent screams. The scent of burnt flesh lingering long after the fires had died. The sound of wet footsteps on temple stone, though no one was there.

The whispers.

First in dreams. Then in the waking hours. Then all the time.

The Goddess did not simply take her offering and leave.

She watched.

She waited.

And those who served her?

They suffered.

The Madness

It was the madness that took them first.

It started as shadows—shapes in the corners of their vision, gone when they turned. Then the statues of the Goddess began to change. Their eyes followed. Their hands moved when no one was looking. Their lips parted in the dead of night.

Then came the voices.

Soft at first, like the wind slipping through old doorways. Then louder. Clearer. Calling their names in the dark.

Some of the keepers clawed at their own skin, convinced something was burrowing beneath. Some tore their own eyes out, screaming that they saw too much. Some—those who tried to resist the pact, those who refused to carry out the sacrifice—never saw another sunrise.

And now, as the temple bells tolled, as the final hour of the Puja approached, as the fever of devotion reached its peak, he knew—

The Goddess was calling.

And she would not be denied.

A drop of sweat slid down Anirban's spine.

The temple air was thick—too thick. It pressed against his skin, clung to his lungs like damp silk. The scent of incense and something darker—coppery, metallic—curled through the chamber. The dhak drums outside had stopped, yet their echoes seemed to tremble in the very stone beneath his feet.

His heartbeat hammered in his ears, deafening.

He turned to Riya.

Fear mirrored in her eyes.

She wasn't breathing right—short, shallow gasps. Her fingers twitched, uncertain whether to reach for him or for something to defend herself. Her gaze flickered past his shoulder, scanning the darkness that pooled in the temple's forgotten corners.

A sound—soft, almost imperceptible.

Like bare feet against ancient stone.

A whisper of fabric shifting.

Anirban's pulse spiked. He swallowed, the dryness in his throat almost painful.

The statues loomed around them—rows upon rows of the Crimson Goddess, her many hands raised in frozen benediction. But in the flickering diya flames, the expressions on their faces seemed to shift. Their mouths curved. Their hollow eyes gleamed, watching.

Something about this place—it was wrong.

The air crackled with an unseen energy, ancient and hungry. Shadows swayed though there was no breeze. The scent of burning camphor thickened, sharp enough to sting his eyes.

And then—

A whisper.

Right behind him.

Not a word. Not a breath.

Just the sensation of sound crawling against the nape of his neck.

Anirban turned sharply—

A sharp blow to the back of his head.

A white-hot pain exploded through his skull.

The world tilted, spiraling.

His knees buckled, his body crashing against the stone. Distantly, he heard Riya gasp—half a cry, half a strangled breath—before another dull thud split the air.

Through his blurring vision, he saw her collapse beside him. Her body twitched once, then stilled.

A shadow loomed.

Mohan Da.

His silhouette, blurred and wavering like a phantom.

His face was unreadable—neither anger nor triumph nor regret. Just something hollow. Something ancient.

When he spoke, his voice was a whisper—low, reverent, filled with something beyond madness.

“The Goddess never forgets.”

And then—

Darkness.

Chapter 8: The Crimson Sacrifice

Pain.

A dull, suffocating weight pressed against Anirban's skull, throbbing in sickening pulses. His mind floated in a haze, sluggish and unmoored, trapped between wakefulness and oblivion. A faint metallic tang clung to his tongue—blood. His blood.

Something reeked. Incense. Oil. Damp stone. Beneath it all, something more pungent—coppery, raw, rotting.

Anirban groaned, the sound barely escaping his throat. He forced his eyes open, but the world swam before him, the dim glow of flickering flames sending long, writhing shadows across the cavernous space.

Then his senses sharpened. And horror sank its teeth into him.

He was no longer in the suffocating dark.

The underground sanctum was alive with light.

The entire sanctum was bathed in crimson.

Not just the idol. Not just the bloodstained altar in the center. Everything. The walls, the carvings, the stone floor beneath him—it all bled red, as if the very rock had been drinking in centuries of spilled blood. The dim glow of the oil lamps did not bring warmth; instead, it only deepened the grotesque hue, making the shadows pulse like open wounds.

It was as if the room itself was alive.

The air was thick, heavy, suffocating, laced with a scent that churned his stomach—iron and decay, sweat and something else, something worse. The dampness in the air wasn't just from the underground moisture. It carried a cloying stickiness, something that made Anirban's skin crawl with an unnamed dread.

He turned his head slightly, his eyes adjusting to the dim, shifting light. That's when he saw them.

The carvings.

Hundreds of them, covering every inch of the stone walls. Twisted faces frozen in torment, limbs contorted into impossible shapes. Some had their mouths gaping wide in silent screams, others had their eyes gouged out, their hands raised in pleading. The figures looked almost human, yet something about their proportions was wrong—stretched too long, bent too sharply, as if reality had warped around them.

The carvings were not merely ancient—they were disturbingly lifelike, etched with a precision that seemed almost unnatural. Twisted figures contorted in agony, their faces frozen in expressions of mute suffering, their mouths carved wide open as if screaming—but there was no sound, only silence that had lasted for centuries. Some of the figures had elongated arms, reaching outward, their bony fingers straining toward something unseen, something just beyond their grasp. Others were half-formed, as if the stone itself had tried to erase them, their bodies melting into the walls like souls desperately clawing to escape.

At the highest point of the sanctum, just beneath the domed ceiling, an entire procession of suffering had been immortalized in stone. A long line of carved figures—women, men, children—walked toward the center, their carved expressions vacant and resigned, their hands bound behind their backs. At the end of the procession stood a towering figure, a priest-like being, holding a ritual blade high above his head, the tip sinking into the forehead of the final victim. The scene was so detailed, so painstakingly etched, that Anirban could see the tiny rivulets of stone blood dripping from the wound.

But it was the central carving, the one directly above the altar, that sent a deep and unshakable dread through his bones.

A massive, looming figure—the Crimson Goddess herself—towered over the scene, her many arms outstretched, her elongated fingers curling inward as if beckoning, claiming. Her face was eerily serene, her lips curled into a smile that seemed almost maternal, almost loving—almost. And yet, something about it was wrong. The longer Anirban stared, the more the expression seemed to shift, twisting into something hungry, something knowing.

Beneath her, carved with unsettling precision, was an altar much like the one in the center of the sanctum. Upon it, a figure lay sprawled—a sacrifice. But its features were indistinct, unfinished, as though it were meant to represent anyone. Everyone.

Anirban's stomach twisted. This place had drunk blood before.

And soon, it would drink again.

One of them was right in front of him.

Etched deep into the pillar he was bound to, the face stared directly at him. Its hollow sockets seemed to bore into his skull, its mouth twisted in a silent, endless wail. The longer he looked, the more his mind played tricks on him—the stone seemed to tremble, as if the thing was still alive, still suffering.

His breathing turned shallow. He could feel the chains biting into his wrists, cold and unforgiving. The flickering light of the lamps made the carvings move, or at least, it felt like they did. The elongated arms of one figure seemed to shift, the gaping mouth of another seemed to widen.

A pulse ran through the air—subtle, like a slow, dragging heartbeat beneath the surface of the stone.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them again, the face in front of him had changed.

The mouth was wider. The expression was different.

And for the briefest, most horrifying moment—

It was his own.

Anirban's breathing quickened. He tried to move—chains.

The chains dug deeper into his flesh as he struggled, the rough metal grinding against his skin, sending sharp jolts of pain through his arms. His breath came in shallow, uneven gasps. The air around him felt dense, pressing against his lungs, as if the very sanctum itself was alive, suffocating him within its crimson embrace.

Then—a sound.

A murmur.

Low. Rhythmic. Unnatural.

It slithered through the air, wrapping around him like an unseen presence. The chanting.

His gaze snapped to the center of the chamber.

And his heart stopped.

Riya.

She lay sprawled on the platform—the altar—at the heart of the sanctum. The stone beneath her was slick, glistening with something dark, something old. The thick red iron chain binding her wrists and ankles blended seamlessly with the bloodstained altar, the fibers frayed as if they had been used for countless rituals before this one.

Her chest rose and fell—barely. Each breath was weak, shallow. Strands of her damp hair clung to her face, her skin sickly pale under the wavering light of the oil lamps. Shadows clung to the hollows of her cheeks, her body too still, too fragile against the immense weight of the place.

Anirban's throat clenched. For a moment, it felt like he wasn't in his body anymore.

Like he was watching something that had already happened.

Another sacrifice. Another girl.

Bound to the same altar. Waiting for the blade.

The world tilted, the weight of centuries pressing down on him. The air reeked of past deaths, of voices that had screamed in this very place before vanishing forever.

A ragged breath tore from his lips.

This wasn't a memory.

This was happening now.

Then—

Scrape.

A slow, vile sound, metal dragged against stone.

The noise slithered through the air, sending a chill down Anirban's spine.

His eyes darted to the far end of the sanctum.

And there, in front of the Crimson Goddess, stood Mohan Da.

His thin, withered frame was hunched, his head tilting at an unnatural angle as he rocked back and forth—front-back-front-back—murmuring, whispering, the ritual bleeding from his lips like a prayer.

In his hands, he held a knife.

Ancient. Jagged. Smeared with sindoor and blood.

And he was sharpening it.

Slowly. Methodically.

Against the stone.

Scrape.

The sound was unbearable. A slow death being carved into the air.

Anirban couldn't breathe.

Mohan Da's fingers, gnarled and trembling, tightened around the hilt. His eyes—half-lidded, lost in something deeper than madness—never wavered from the idol towering above him.

The Crimson Goddess loomed, her gaze hollow, her mouth a twisted smirk frozen in time.

Mohan Da's lips moved feverishly, his fingers twitching, his eyes locked onto the idol's bloodied face.

Then—suddenly—his head snapped toward Anirban.

“You woke up just in time,” Mohan Da murmured, his voice laced with something between reverence and madness. “The Goddess wills it so.”

Anirban clenched his jaw. “Let Riya go.”

Mohan Da let out a soft chuckle, almost pitying. “Do you still not understand?” His fingers traced the blade, almost lovingly. “This has happened before. It will happen again. The pact is eternal.”

Anirban’s fists tightened. “Your ancestors made this pact, not us. Not her. She has nothing to do with this madness.”

Mohan Da’s eyes flickered—something unreadable in their depths. Then, slowly, he stepped closer, his bare feet soundless against the crimson-stained floor.

“There was a time I thought like you,” he said. “That I could resist. That I could run.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I was wrong.”

His gaze drifted, momentarily unfocused, lost in some distant, nightmarish memory. Then, with terrifying swiftness, his eyes snapped back to Anirban’s.

“She never forgets.”

A cold shiver licked up Anirban’s spine.

Mohan Da tilted his head. “Tell me, do you know what happens to those who break a pact with a god?”

Anirban didn’t answer.

Mohan Da stepped even closer, his breath warm against Anirban’s cheek, carrying the metallic tang of blood.

“They are *unmade.*”

A twisted smile curled his lips. “The Goddess does not merely punish. She *erases.* Every bone, every whisper of their existence… wiped from the fabric of this world. Forgotten by

time itself."

His fingers curled around Anirban's jaw, tilting his face toward the idol.

"Look at her."

Anirban's muscles locked, but he didn't look away.

"She has watched generations kneel before her," Mohan Da whispered. "She has tasted their devotion. Their fear. And tonight, she will feast again."

He stepped back, lifting the knife. The dim glow of the sanctum flickered across its edge.

Anirban's heart pounded. He had to stall.

"What did you see?" he asked, his voice steady despite the fear clawing at his chest.

Mohan Da hesitated.

Anirban pressed on. "You said you tried to resist once. What did you see?"

For a moment, silence. Then, something shifted in Mohan Da's expression.

"…I saw her." His voice trembled. "Not as an idol. Not as a vision. But *her*. In the darkness. In the mirror. In my dreams."

His breath hitched. "I heard them—the ones before me. Their screams. Their prayers." He exhaled shakily. "But she never answered."

A slow, unsettling smile crept onto his face. "Because gods do not listen. They *take*."

Anirban's pulse roared in his ears.

Mohan Da stepped back, raising the blade. His fingers tightened

around the hilt.

“The Goddess is waiting.”

He turned toward Riya.

Anirban’s blood turned to ice.

Anirban yanked at the iron shackles with every ounce of strength left in his body. His wrists burned, his muscles screamed, but he kept pulling, twisting, wrenching against the rusted metal that held him captive. His breathing was ragged, his heartbeat hammering against his ribs like a war drum. Time blurred—minutes, hours, maybe even days—but he didn’t stop. He couldn’t.

A sharp snap echoed through the chamber.

The chains broke.

Anirban staggered forward, gasping for breath, his legs trembling beneath him. Mohan Da loomed over Riya, the blade glinting ominously in the dim, flickering firelight. His lips moved in whispered chants, eyes glazed with devotion—or madness. The air itself seemed to thicken, pressing down like an unseen force.

Anirban lunged.

His body crashed into Mohan Da, sending him stumbling back. The old man’s feet slid against the blood-slicked floor, and he tumbled down the steps of the central dais, landing beneath the towering idol of the Crimson Goddess. The shadows danced unnaturally across the walls, their shifting shapes warping into grotesque figures as if the Goddess herself was watching.

A guttural snarl tore from Mohan Da’s throat as he scrambled to his feet, wild eyes locking onto Anirban. “You dare defy her?” he hissed, his voice trembling between fury and reverence.

Anirban didn’t answer. He was already moving, dodging as Mohan Da slashed at him with the ritual dagger. The blade gleamed wickedly in the firelight before it carved through the air. Anirban barely managed to twist away, but the edge grazed his arm, slicing through his shirt and drawing a thin line of blood. He hissed but didn’t stop. The adrenaline coursing through his veins drowned out the pain.

Mohan Da struck again—faster this time, his movements fueled by something beyond human endurance. His mouth moved rapidly, spitting out incantations, the very walls seeming to pulse with each syllable. The sanctum was alive, humming with an ancient, unseen force.

Anirban ducked under another swipe and caught Mohan Da's wrist mid-swing. They grappled, twisting, bodies colliding in a deadly struggle. Mohan Da was stronger than he looked, his grip vice-like, his wiry frame packed with unnatural strength. Anirban gritted his teeth, feeling his muscles strain, his pulse roaring in his ears.

"The Goddess chose me!" Mohan Da spat, his breath hot against Anirban's face. "She speaks through me! You cannot stop what has already begun!"

Anirban snarled, shoving against him, sending them both crashing into a stone pillar. The impact was brutal, knocking the breath from both men. The dagger clattered to the ground, spinning wildly before landing just out of reach.

Mohan Da roared and lashed out, his fingers like claws, raking at Anirban's face. Anirban barely managed to turn his head in time, but sharp nails scraped against his cheek, drawing blood. The stinging pain only fueled his resolve. He slammed his knee into Mohan Da's gut, sending the older man staggering back. But Mohan Da'seyes… they were wide, manic, reflecting the flames as if he were seeing something beyond mortal comprehension.

Mohan Da staggered backward, his breath ragged, his wild eyes darting around the sanctum. The flickering flames cast grotesque shadows on the stone walls, making the carvings writhe and twist as if coming alive. Anirban's chest heaved as he wiped the blood from his face, stepping toward Mohan Da, who suddenly stilled, his lips parting in a silent gasp.

A single oil lamp, perched on a jagged stone, wobbled from the impact of their struggle. Anirban barely had time to react before the lamp tipped, crashing to the ground. The oil seeped into the crimson-stained floor, and within seconds, fire roared to life, slithering like a living entity across the sanctum.

The moment the flames touched the blood-drenched ground, the air

changed. The whispers, low and insidious, crawled through the chamber. At first, they were faint—a distant murmur—but then they grew, overlapping, clashing, a cacophony of voices from the abyss.

Mohan Da's breath hitched. His pupils dilated as he clutched his head. "No… no… this is not real…"

The walls trembled. The carved eyes of the Crimson Goddess seemed to glow, watching, waiting.

A shriek tore from Mohan Da's throat. He dropped to his knees, hands pressed against his ears. "She is here… she is here… she will kill me…!" His voice cracked, turning into a wail of sheer terror.

Anirban took a step back, sweat slicking his forehead. The flames surged higher, licking at the stone pillars, casting eerie, shifting patterns that made the sanctum feel endless. The carvings around the room twisted, faces frozen in agony, mouths open in silent screams.

Mohan Da clutched his chest, his breathing erratic. His eyes darted wildly as if he could see something Anirban couldn't. He staggered toward the idol, his trembling hands reaching out. "Forgive me… Goddess… please…"

But there was no answer. Only the fire. Only the voices.

A sudden cough snapped Anirban's attention to the altar. Riya.

She was still unconscious, her wrists bound in cruel iron chains that had cut into her skin, leaving behind angry red welts. The fire crept closer, licking at the walls, casting long, writhing shadows that danced like specters of the past. The heat pressed against Anirban's skin, searing his lungs with every desperate breath. Sweat dripped from his brow, mingling with the dust and soot that clung to his face. His heart pounded a violent rhythm against his ribs, but his hands remained steady.

He snatched a jagged stone from the floor, its rough edges biting into his palm. His breath came in short, ragged gasps as he raised the stone high and brought it down against the chains. The impact sent a jarring shock up his arm. The metal barely budged.

“Come on, damn it!” Anirban growled through clenched teeth, his voice hoarse with frustration. He struck again, harder this time. Sparks flew as stone met metal, the sound ringing out like a desperate battle cry against the encroaching inferno.

The chains groaned, but they held firm.

Smoke curled around them, thick and choking, wrapping its tendrils around Riya’s lifeless form. Anirban’s grip on the stone tightened. He couldn't lose her. Not now. Not after everything.

With renewed fury, he slammed the stone down again and again, the blows reverberating through the chamber. His muscles burned, his knuckles split open from the force, but he didn’t stop. He wouldn’t stop.

A final strike. A deafening clang.

The iron snapped, breaking apart in jagged shards.

Riya’s body sagged forward, her weight suddenly heavy against him. Anirban lunged, catching her before she could collapse completely. His arms wrapped around her instinctively, cradling her against his chest. She was warm—alive. The faint rise and fall of her chest sent a shuddering wave of relief through him.

“Riya…” he whispered, his voice almost breaking. His fingers brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, smudging a streak of soot across her cheek. Even now, amidst fire and death, she looked peaceful—ethereal, as if untouched by the horrors around them.

A roaring explosion from behind snapped him back to reality. The fire surged, devouring the chamber with relentless hunger. The heat grew unbearable, waves of searing air rolling over him like the breath of a monstrous entity. The very walls trembled, stones cracking and falling as the ancient sanctum threatened to collapse. Mohan Da’s shrieks echoed through the chaos, a sound so raw, so filled with agony, that it sent shivers racing down Anirban’s spine.

But there was something else in that scream—something unhinged.

He risked a glance back and immediately wished he hadn’t.

Mohan Da writhed in the flames, his body contorted, his robes catching like dry leaves in the wind. His face twisted with

something indistinguishable—a mixture of agony and rapture, his lips moving in frantic murmurs. His arms stretched toward the idol, fingers curling as if reaching for salvation—or something else. The fire reflected in his wide, unblinking eyes, making it impossible to tell what he truly saw in those last moments.

The sanctum trembled. The ground beneath him pulsed, or perhaps it was only his own racing heart. The whispers—were there whispers? Or was it the wind shrieking through the crumbling walls? He wasn't sure anymore.

Anirban felt an overwhelming pressure settle over him, thick as blood, curling around his limbs like invisible chains. His breath hitched, his legs suddenly heavy, as if the temple itself wished to keep him within its grasp. His grip on Riya tightened. He had to move. Now.

He turned toward the narrow exit, forcing one foot in front of the other. The air felt thick, resisting him with every step. It was as though unseen hands reached from the darkness, clawing at his clothes, whispering, begging, demanding that he stay.

He pushed forward.

The stairs stretched before him, seemingly endless, twisting into the darkness. Every step felt like a battle against exhaustion and the oppressive heat. The sanctum groaned, its ancient bones cracking under the strain. The fire surged, licking at his heels.

One last glance over his shoulder.

Mohan Da convulsed in the flames, his lips still moving, forming words Anirban couldn't hear. His melted eyes stared blankly, unseeing yet filled with something unfathomable. The firelight played tricks, twisting shadows into grotesque forms along the walls. Perhaps it was the flickering flames, or the heat distorting his vision—but for a fleeting moment, the idol's painted lips seemed to curve, just slightly.

Anirban tore his gaze away and ran.

The suffocating heat faded as he emerged from the underground sanctum. The evening air, thick with the last remnants of sunlight, rushed to meet him, cool yet heavy with the weight of incense and

celebration. The sky was ablaze with hues of orange and crimson, the dying sun casting long shadows over the city. A gust of wind carried the scent of marigolds and sandalwood, swirling through the streets, weaving between the throngs of people gathered for the final farewell.

Anirban barely registered any of it. His body was exhausted, trembling from exertion, his arms burning with the weight of Riya. Yet he held her close, instinctively shielding her, as if the world beyond the temple walls might somehow steal her away. Her head rested against his chest, her breath shallow but steady. He exhaled sharply, relief flooding through him, but it did little to ease the frantic hammering of his heart.

Then, he looked up—and the world came alive.

The city pulsed with devotion, with celebration, with sorrow. Drums thundered in hypnotic rhythms, their beats merging with the clamor of conch shells and the melodic chants of priests. The streets were bathed in golden light from a thousand flickering diyas, their flames swaying like tiny dancers in the evening breeze. People swarmed together in waves of color—saris of red, gold, and white flowing like rivers through the crowded lanes. Vermillion streaked their foreheads, their cheeks, their very souls, as they raised their hands to the heavens, singing, praying, bidding their goddess farewell.

At the heart of it all, the idols of Durga towered above the sea of devotees, their faces serene, their eyes filled with an ethereal knowing. Carried upon wooden platforms, they moved slowly towards the river, their final journey before immersion. The goddess was leaving, retreating to her celestial abode, but her presence lingered in every chant, every tear, every joyous cry of farewell.

And amidst it all, Anirban stood, caught between two worlds—the frenzied revelry of the city and the quiet, lingering storm within him. His grip on Riya tightened, his fingers brushing against her soot-streaked skin. He tilted his head down, studying her, memorizing every detail—the delicate flutter of her lashes, the soft parting of her lips, the rise and fall of her chest. The firelight played across her face, painting her in shades of gold and amber, as if she, too, were something divine.

He felt an ache, deep and undeniable, curling through his ribs.

Gently, he brushed away a smudge of ash from her cheek, his thumb lingering against her skin. Her warmth seeped into him, grounding him, soothing the lingering tremors in his hands. He had almost lost her. The thought alone sent a shiver down his spine.

Then, as the first idol touched the river's surface, Riya stirred.

A soft breath escaped her lips, a whisper of life returning. Her lashes fluttered, her body shifting slightly in his embrace. And then, finally, her eyes opened.

Anirban inhaled sharply.

She looked at him, her gaze hazy, searching, and for a moment, nothing else existed. The distant echo of the drums, the murmur of the crowd, the golden glow of the festival—it all blurred into the background. There was only her. Only the quiet recognition in her eyes, the silent understanding passing between them like an unspoken vow.

A faint smile played at the corners of her lips, fragile yet real.

Anirban's throat tightened. He swallowed, his fingers grazing the curve of her jaw, tracing the delicate line of her face as if reassuring himself that she was here, that she was safe. She blinked slowly, her gaze never leaving his, as if she, too, was trying to make sense of the moment, of the sheer weight of everything they had just endured.

The world moved around them in a blur of fire and devotion, but they remained still—caught in their own sacred moment, untouched by the frenzy of the festival.

Then, gently, as if drawn by an unseen force, Anirban leaned down, pressing his forehead to hers. He closed his eyes, exhaling softly against her skin. She smelled of smoke and sweat and something unmistakably her. He could feel her heartbeat, steady now, syncing with his own.

And as the city danced and wept, as the goddess departed and the river embraced her, Anirban held Riya closer, breathing her in, feeling, for the first time in what felt like an eternity, that he had

truly escaped the darkness.

The city's fervor slowly gave way to quieter streets as the night deepened. The echoes of drums still lingered in the air, though distant now, softened by the vast expanse of the old quarters of North Kolkata. Here, in the labyrinth of narrow alleys, where colonial-era buildings leaned with age and the streetlights flickered uncertainly, the remnants of the festival were mere traces—crushed marigold petals scattered along cobbled pathways, a stray conch shell abandoned by a priest, streaks of sindoor marking the thresholds of homes.

In a dimly lit by-lane, nestled between two ancient structures, a modest home stood silent. Its once-bright yellow walls had faded into muted ochre, cracks running like veins through its surface. The wooden shutters of the windows creaked slightly with the breeze, the scent of burnt incense seeping through the gaps. Inside, the glow of a single oil lamp flickered, casting elongated shadows against the old, peeling walls.

A woman sat on a rickety wooden chair, her fingers absentmindedly stroking the soft curls of a six-year-old boy. He sniffled, rubbing his tired eyes with small fists.

"Maa, when will Baba come home?" the child's voice was barely above a whisper.

She hushed him gently, rocking him in her lap. "Soon, shona. He will return soon."

The boy yawned, his tiny body curling into her warmth, soothed by the rhythmic strokes of her hand against his back. His breaths evened out, soft and steady, as sleep finally claimed him. The woman let out a quiet sigh, her gaze lingering on the darkened doorway ahead.

Rising carefully, she carried the boy to a small cot in the corner, tucking him under a thin cotton sheet. She brushed a hand over his forehead, a lingering touch, before stepping away. Her bare feet moved soundlessly over the cold floor as she crossed the room, the flickering lamp casting shifting patterns around her.

She stopped before a wooden cabinet, its lacquer worn with time. Slowly, hesitantly, she opened it. Inside, tucked between stacks of

old letters and rusted trinkets, was a framed photograph. She lifted it gently, fingers brushing against the glass.

The image stared back at her.

A younger Mohan Da, his smile broad, his eyes warm. Beside him stood a woman—her, years ago—her expression serene, her hand resting on the shoulder of a small boy, their son. A picture of a family, whole and unbroken, captured in time before the shadows crept in.

Her grip on the frame tightened. A tremor ran through her fingers.

She traced the contours of Mohan Da's face with her thumb, as if seeking something—some lingering warmth, some echo of the man she had known. But the glass was cold. Just like the silence that had taken root in her home, in her heart.

A gust of wind slipped through the half-open window, making the oil lamp's flame flicker wildly. Shadows stretched and swayed across the walls, twisting in eerie shapes. The woman exhaled slowly, her breath unsteady.

Far away, beneath the city where the echoes of drums had faded, where the river carried away the remnants of deities and devotion, the underground sanctum remained untouched. The flames had died, but the air was thick with something else—a presence that refused to be extinguished.

The walls, stained in deep crimson, pulsed faintly, as if breathing. The silence was deceptive. It was the kind of silence that watched, that waited.

Mohan Da's body was never found. Nor his burnt ashes.

And the goddess… she was still waiting.

Angry.

She did not get her sacrifice.

Now, she would.

Somewhere in the hollow darkness of the sanctum, unseen eyes opened.

The Goddess Never Forgets

सर्वमङ्गलमाङ्गल्ये शिवे सर्वार्थसाधिके
शरण्ये त्र्यम्बके गौरि नारायणि नमोऽस्तु त